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Tempering Steel: Reapproaching the Mythos of Superman

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TEMPERING STEEL: REAPPROACHING THE MYTHOS OF SUPERMAN

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
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TEMPERING STEEL: REAPPROACHING THE MYTHOS OF SUPERMAN

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TEMPERING STEEL: REAPPROACHING THE MYTHOS OF SUPERMAN

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This study seeks to answer a question posed in *Superman* #156 and frequently throughout the history of the DC Comics Universe: Must there be a Superman? In answering this question, this study seeks to seam together over sixty years of Superman to better understand the mythology associated with these narratives as well as their impact on American culture. In an analysis of Mark Waid's *Superman: Birthright* (2003), the basic forms of the origin narrative are addressed as well as how Waid reconstructs the mythos for the twenty-first century. The second chapter addresses deconstructive narratives and the issue of shifting the context of Superman. This particular portion of the study examines Mark Waid's *Kingdom Come* (1996), Mark Millar's *Superman: Red Son* (2003) and Alan Moore's *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* (1986). The goal of this unit is to see how deconstructive narratives both break and adhere to the established continuity of the mythos and well as how the shift affects the audience's appreciation for Superman. Despite almost a century in publication, Superman somehow retains a popular and cultural familiarity more so than other fictional icons. Authors such as Waid, Millar, and Moore have constructed versions of Superman capable of making sense in the twenty-first century yet adhering to the ideas established by Jerry Siegel and Joel Shuster in the 1930's.

COSTUMES, CAPES, AND CRITICISM

Critics of comic books will often diminish their value by labeling them as simple morality tales, constructed to be nothing more than power fantasies for adolescent males or men unwilling to forego a final figment of their childhood. Such one-dimensional descriptions of this form of literature and its audience negate the complexity of the reading experience or the subsequent rewards these texts offer.

The comic book was born out of the popularity of the pulp novels of the 1920's and 1930's as well as the extraordinary heroes and villains who occupied their pages. The addition of artwork stemmed from the recognition of several notable comic strip characters who existed in the "funny pages" of national newspapers. The emergence of an extended visual narrative arrived decades before the advent of television and yet hearkened back to classic woodcuts and other popular means of illustration that had complemented the written word for centuries. Readers, both adult and adolescent, took quick note of this new form of popular entertainment and publishers sold copies of these colorful magazines by the millions.¹

One hero pervaded the pages of these comics, which really weren't all that funny, since his appearance in *Action Comics* #1. Almost a century later, Superman remains the most iconic character in comic books, in part because he is the first superhero. The name says it all: he is a "super" man. Superman is the archetype from whence all other superheroes come. In one way or another, every costumed hero since 1938 owes something to the Man in Blue, which is likely the reason that DC Comics comfortably places him at the head of their mythological pantheon of characters. He is the hero that

¹ The definitive text for the history of the comic book is Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2001, second edition).

all others look to as an example of how to act. The problem is, though, that it isn't easy being Superman. Even more so, it's not easy writing Superman and keeping the character relevant in a postmodern-oriented twenty-first century.

Other than the uproar in the 1950's over the comics code and the so called "vulgarity" of the comics medium, the 1980's marked the first time in the history of sequential art that the mainstream press, and moreover academic critics, took note of the ways these stories were being told in the genre. Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986) questioned the popularity as well as the efficacy of costumed vigilantes. His tale, which revised United States history from the end of World War II through the 1980s and the nuclear tensions of the Cold War, challenged the wisdom of placing our faith in masked men and women who were often granted moral superiority by the public simply because they pretended to be heroic. Moore called into question both the extreme popularity of the comic book hero as well as dealing with the notions of existential responsibility in the postmodern age.

Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) continued to challenge the construct of the masked superhero by taking on one of the most notable figures: Batman. The Caped Crusader was no longer the campy Adam West version that most Americans were familiar with thanks to the *Batman* television series (1966-68) that starred Adam West as a not-so Dark Knight. Miller's Batman was a bitter, disenchanted vigilante who had abandoned the pretenses of nobility and good in order to wrest control of his city from the hands of an array of villains. Unlike the dapper, young, and foppish Bruce Wayne who had frequented the pages of the Batman comics, Miller's Wayne was middle aged and scarred from the years of fighting and sacrifice. *The Dark Knight Returns* became the

standard bearer for all Batman comics over the next twenty-five years.

Both revisionist works used the medium of comic books and the collected graphic novel to tell a limited yet extended story that addressed the concerns of writers, artists and readers of the superhero genre. By and large, the only revisions to the Superman mythos had been the occasional new origin narrative as well as the introduction of new characters to the series; however, contemporary authors have found that Superman offers a mythology as deep as any other in comics mythology, and have frequently approached the character in hopes of shedding new light on the Man of Steel.

This study seeks to explore the means by which writers have reexamined the Superman mythos over the past decade. Superman, a character often dubbed irrelevant for a contemporary audience, provides the most ample ground for deconstruction because he stands as the literary archetype that all other superheroes follow.

In any analysis of literature, there is no general qualitative means that a critic may employ to ascertain the effectiveness of an author's work. In the world of comic books, the ultimate signifier of a work's inherent value is the response of the readers. Richard Reynolds proposes three specific tenants that construct the fan expectations of a revised origin narrative. While Reynold's intent is to address the concerns of the origin narrative, it can also be applied to greater acts of revisionism and, as such, is suited for my critique of these additions to the Superman mythos: the retelling of the origin will bring some new aspect of the character to light; the new creative team will use the stamp of its own creative style as a governing element in the reinterpretation of the character; and whatever new material is created and whatever new connections are made between existing plotlines, continuity will be seen to be preserved (17).

The author's primary interest should be to bring some new aspect of the character to life, most of all, by making Superman feel relevant for the time in which the text is written. Superman was created in the 1930s as a response to the lack of moral heroes for adolescents. Jerry Siegel and Joel Shuster wanted a figure that could embody the morals of their Hebrew moral heroes with the veracity of the Greek and Roman heroes of mythology. The problem that remains is figures such as Moses, Samson, Odysseus, and Achilles do not make sense in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As such, Superman must address the climate in which he is written. This necessity is especially important when focusing on origin narratives—as we shall explore in the first chapter. New authors will often find that the period before Clark Kent dons the blue, red and yellow costume will offer more than adequate room for exploration; moreover, the most influential additions to the mythos deal with the why and how of superheroics.

Creative teams of writers and artists often surprise an artist with the new style brought to the Superman character. As a visual medium, comic books and graphic novels offer as much individuality and opportunity to add further nuances in ink and color as with words. This study employs several uses of the actual comic book page itself while addressing the additions and revisions to the mythos. Since styles of writing and artistry have changed drastically over the span of decades, the reader may see that visual changes are just as important as the written variations. In a field that often places preference on the written word, it is important to obtain the full picture when drawing our analysis.

Because concerns of continuity often mar the creative expression of comic writers and artists, one may perceive these prohibitions to be the greatest challenge in bringing new life to the character. The second chapter of this essay will deal specifically with this

issue. Because the authors of the monthly Superman titles must adhere to a rigid code, the most dramatic works in the mythos are often those that break with continuity altogether. When this severance occurs, the author is given the freedom to reshape Superman in any way that he or she sees fit; however, allegiance Superman and the heroic and moral principles that the character represents often cause the author to at least mirror or return to these traditional values—such as Truth, Justice, and the American Way—in some form.

As Joseph Campbell notes in the *Power of Myth*, “[. . .] we have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly thrown. [. . .] where we had thought to be alone, we will be with all the world” (151). As a figure who has reached global recognition and importance, Superman may be viewed a figure of hope and the promise of what humanity may achieve when given the opportunity to succeed.

CLAIMING HIS BIRTHRIGHT

From time to time characters have to experience what comics writers call *retroactive continuity*, which refers to a “resetting” of a character's story so that it can be contextualized for the contemporary audience of readers. The complexity of this situation is that the Superman who so famously entered the medium in the first half of the twentieth century is not the Superman you will find on the shelves at the local comic book store or in the graphic novels section of the local bookseller. Jerry Siegel and Joel Shuster's original Superman, which first appeared in *Action Comics #1* (1938), was a wise guy who took on social ills moreso than supervillains. He was a character that was far more human than alien, with powers that would seem meek in comparison to the near godlike status he enjoys today.

It took decades for the Superman mythology to develop thanks, in part, to the popularity of the figure and the subsequent need for additional writers and artists to keep up with the demands of an ever-growing fan base. Two specific additions during the 1950's served to develop Superman's backstory. First, the decade saw the introduction of Superboy, an attempt to explain what Superman was like when he was a teenager and how his powers evolved. The fans of the series, who were mostly adolescent boys, wanted a figure they could better connect with. While Superman was a hero to aspire to, the Superboy character was created much for same reasons as Batman acquired the Boy Wonder sidekick Robin. Young readers could experience the series through the vantage point of a character similar in age.

After a major decline in sales during the years following World War II, all but three



Superman's origin narrative has become more complex with each new incarnation. The story from Superman #1 (1940) bears little resemblance to Mark Waid's Superman: Birthright.

of DC's titles folded due to poor sales. Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, the lone remnants of comic's original Golden Age, emerged from this publishing slump in 1956 at the beginning of what comic historians call the Silver Age. With the revival of such characters as Green Lantern, Hawkman and Green Arrow, writers needed a device that would bridge the decade long gap absence of many of these heroes and other (lesser known) figures. The second addition to the mythos, provided the answer to the continuity gap. The solution was to introduce multiple narrative worlds for the stories to take place. The plan (later dubbed the Multiverse) introduced a second Superman who occupied Earth-1 and, like the other heroes of that Earth, never aged, while on Earth-2, the original Superman and his fellow heroes grew older with the passing years. In this series of infinite worlds, there was even an earth that parodied our own, where children read comic books and dreamed of becoming heroes. The new Superman who occupied Earth-1 became more of a demigod with each subsequent creative team to the point that Superman was nearly invincible, while the Earth-2 Superman maintained a semblance of realism by growing older, eventually marrying Lois Lane and settling into middle age.

The separate Superman entities worked seemingly well for several decades until 1985 and DC's Crisis on Infinite Earths changed the mythological landscape. In the narrative, the Superman of Earth-2 sacrifices himself to save all the other heroes in hopes of defeating the universe's most powerful villain. Instead of dying, though, the Earth-2 Superman and his Lois Lane are folded into a special "heaven" that stands outside the regular continuity, to remain largely forgotten by the comics world. The series was meant to strip years of continuity and afford new readers a "jumping on" point for DC's comics and create a singular narrative universe for DC's heroes and villains.

In the “post-Crisis” universe, fan-favorite John Byrne was given a chance to reinvent the Superman character once more. His Superman had the benefit of Jonathan and Martha Kent's remaining alive throughout his adulthood acting as a constant reminder of his humanity. Byrne's Superman was stripped of the demigod abilities. Of course he still had powers beyond those of mere mortals, but was unable to accomplish truly unbelievable tasks such as moving planets. The “post-Crisis” Superman is the same Superman who propelled the 1992 (in)famous “Death of Superman.” The character that emerged from this highly-publicized and highly-purchased series was far more nuanced and complex than Siegel and Shuster's Superman. In the interim, four costumed heroes emerged to claim the mantle of Superman. However, each figure only embodied one of the traits that were valued by Superman: decisiveness (the Superman Android), confidence (Superboy), justice (Steel) and sacrifice (the Eradicator). Each character lacked the composite identity that had made Superman such a lasting figure. The notable absence should have caused the writers of the series to realize the importance of the iconic hero; however, both fanboys¹ and critics alike argue the death and resurrection of Superman resulted in a hero that was less self-assured and decisive than the hero who once occupied the pages of various comics. Suddenly, in times of great crisis, Superman was riddled with self doubt that is found only in “real people.” While this realist approach to comics worked with other figures—most notably Batman—the choice only served to convolute the absolute system of Truth, Justice and the American Way so famously associated with Superman.

¹ A fanboy refers to someone, generally an adolescent or early-adult male, who immerses himself in the fictional worlds of comics and the culture of comics fandom, to the exclusion of a more mainstream social life. The term is often used in a derogatory manner by other less obsessed fans. While the term originated with the comics industry, it has been applied to video games, movies, television and other entertainment media.

It was not a surprise then when Mark Waid was approached in 2002 to develop a new retelling of Superman's origin. At the time, the series was meant to be a 12-issue refresher course—a place for new readers to jump on in the ongoing story of the Man of Steel. What DC didn't say to the audience was that these chapters in the Superman mythos would become the contemporary “official origin” of Superman within the DC Universe. Waid, who was no stranger to the character, was given the opportunity to redefine the Last Son of Krypton for a global, post-9/11 world. Making Superman relevant for the twenty-first century was, most certainly, not an easy task.

In *Birthright*, Waid has constructed a new version of Superman true to the insulated Midwestern values that foster his notions of Truth and Justice, but who is also a modern person with a balanced, global perspective that isn't so focused on the American way. Clark Kent has seen the best and worst of humanity in his quest for a whole identity and is, at last, ready to embrace the best of it. He is a part of the human experience, but will be marked separately and above it as Superman.

Waid explains in his essay “The Real Truth About Superman” that placing the hero in a contemporary context is an almost impossible task:

[The twenty-first century has] created a distance between Superman and his intended audience, because now they can't help but ask 'why?' If this 'Man of Tomorrow'--aka Kal-El, the Last Son of Krypton--grew up in today's world, with anything even remotely resembling a contemporary point of view on heroism, why on Earth would he even consider embracing a path of selflessness? (6)

Despite his protestations, there was no better person for the job. Waid is the only person who can accurately claim to have read every comic, watched every television show, cartoon and movie, and listened to every radio drama that deals with the Superman mythos. Waid's effort, which approaches such a complex and layered tradition, raises

extremely pointed and difficult questions about the state of the comics industry.

Superheroes have always been a fairly easy subject to deal with—good wins out over evil. Thanks to the deconstructive narratives starting in the late 1960's and entering the comics medium in the 1980's, a black and white clear-cut dichotomy of heroism simply would not be sufficient.

Waid's collected volume *Superman: Birthright* presents a twenty-something Clark Kent who is trying to find his place in the world. The narrative is different from the Superboy stories of the past fifty years in that Clark has already moved beyond Smallville in search of finding his place in the greater world. In essence, Clark is facing what contemporary pop psychologists would cannily call the “quarter-life crisis.” He has already merged into the adult world physically; however, he must find a niche in which not only to exist but to thrive as well. Waid was also very aware of the popularity of the WB Network's *Smallville* television series. In order to steer clear of the potential storylines the television character would face, Waid decided to place his Clark Kent in a different age and setting altogether. *Birthright* is different from other works that had been written in that Clark knows that he is different but has yet to fully realize the extent of his otherness or what destiny lay ahead. Interweaved in the narrative is a Superman that must deal first of all with personal questions if he is to become a hero at work in Metropolis as well as the most famous of super-icons. The past, present and future of our hero merge into one text that has openly been embraced by readers of Superman's exploits. All of the classic ideas are there: the costume, Lois Lane, the *Daily Planet*, and Lex Luthor. What does change is the tone of the story and the quest for heroism. Superman's placing himself into the skepticism of contemporary culture and asking to be

its hero is an almost ludicrous request. However, Waid transplants this cultural icon unapologetically and receives the thanks of the Superman legacy in return.

Richard Reynold's *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992) establishes seven criteria for origin narratives². Three of Reynold's principles are central to Waid's recontextualizing of Superman in *Birthright* for a contemporary audience: the hero is marked out from society and often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents; the extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings; and the stories are mythical and use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder.

The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents.

Waid's fourteen-page prologue establishes an updated version of the early biography of Superman. "Our son. The last of the El family. The last son of Krypton. Let him never forget," hopefully proclaims Jor-El, father of Kal-El the future Superman of our planet (Waid 13). As the very structure of the planet Krypton begins to collapse around him, Jor-El executes a plan that will allow his son not only to survive the catastrophe that

2 Reynolds establishes seven criteria for the origin narrative:

1. The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents.
2. At least some of the superheroes will be like earthbound gods in their level of powers. Other superheroes of lesser powers will consort easily with these earthbound deities.
3. The hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law.
4. The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.
5. Likewise, the extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter-ego. Certain taboos will govern the actions of these alter-egos.
6. Although ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws.
7. The stories are mythical and use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder. (16)

will befall their people but also will ultimately place little Kal-El in an environment where he will thrive and become our planet's Man of Tomorrow. At face value, the story seems relatively the same as the Siegel and Byrne versions. However, Siegel simply noted he was sent from a dying world with little to no details, and Byrne established their son as not already in existence. The Superman who left Krypton was the basic genetic information of his parents that reacted to create a son who would mature on the way to Earth. Waid's version is more nuanced and is meant to emphasize the world of Krypton and what exactly is being lost as Kal-El becomes the sole survivor of the planet.

Critics have often pointed to the overt Christological influences of a narrative where a distant father sends his only son to a planet. In the case of Kal-El, though, there is an inherent reversal at work. Kal-El is sent to save not the people of Earth, but his own people. While his father is certain that he will be the last remnant of a once adventurous and advanced society, he becomes the hope of a once hope-filled people. Thus, Kal-El will be the lone representative of his people in a world that may see him as hostile; however, the most fleeting consolation that Jor-El possesses is that he has not remained passive like the rest of his culture in the face of this danger. He has acted with a sense of resolve—a trait that will later manifest itself in his son. As the ship rockets away from the doomed planet, Lara, Jor-El's wife and Kal-El's mother, poignantly adds, “You've nothing to be sorry for, my love. You gave Kal-El all a father can give his son. You gave him every chance” (Waid 17).

The “orphan” syndrome in comic books is often the result of a tragedy that befalls the protagonist in his formative years. A young Bruce Wayne stands by helpless as his parents are shot point-blank by a common street thug. The massive trauma from this

situation provides the catalyst for Wayne to don cape and cowl and become Batman.

Peter Parker suffers the loss of both parents in a fatal car accident and the later murder of his Uncle Ben before resolving to become Spiderman in order to right social wrongs.

What makes Superman unique is that young Kal-El is orphaned through a cognizant choice. He is unaware of this fact until much later in life, but his parents' desire to save the life of their son—even through such an extreme measure—resonates with the theme of sacrifice present in *Birthright*.

However, Kal-El is not alone on his distant journey. His mother includes a digital computer similar to an e-book in his shuttle pod. The book is a text that recounts the history of Krypton—the advancements of their people over thousands of years, the spaces conquered and the symbol of their heritage. One constant remains throughout the history of Kal-El's people: the “S” symbol the reader so often associates with Superman. The problem of the text is that it is written in the indecipherable Kryptonian hieroglyphs. Kal-El is left with only images of what his heritage contains. This provides a certain alienation from his past while at the same time connecting him to it. Clark Kent knows that he is different from every person around him—he knows that he is an alien from another world. However, he cannot find his place within that world and its loss forces him to feel a certain amount of distance from both of his inhabited spaces.

Waid's prologue is quickly broken with a twenty-five year old Clark Kent traveling through a fictional West African nation. Unlike the original origin narrative and even subsequent acts of retroactive continuity, Waid does not waste narrative effort recounting the landing of the shuttle in Kansas or even Clark's teenage years. He assumes the reader to be already familiar with the most basic elements of the Superman mythos. Waid

ignores traditional plot devices such as the first manifestation of super-human abilities or even how Clark deals with those powers. This portion of the mythos has already been accomplished, as I previously noted, through the WB network drama *Smallville*. Waid, instead, explores another time gap in the narrative that helps to contextualize the myth for the twenty-first century. Unlike in decades past, American culture has created another insular buffer before young adults enter the “real world.” Within the years from eighteen to twenty-five, many young adults are meant to attend college and establish their adult identity.

In this frame of early adulthood, the reader finds a different Clark Kent—a nomadic wanderer desperately trying to find his place in a world he wants to fit into but doesn't exactly know how to. It isn't until page thirty-five that Clark even mentions his parents. Even then they are not shown, but simply appear in the address line of an email. Readers are given a wink-and-nod to remind them that the humble Kent family is an integral part of the story, but there is something more pertinent to the author's reexamination of Superman. While the Kents are often the focus of Clark's moral development, Waid chooses for Clark to encounter Kobe Asuru, an African political activist who seeks to end generations of abuse and slavery of his people by a neighboring tribe. Clark visits Asuru hoping for the opportunity to interview the famous figure. As an aspiring reporter who strung together various visiting student credits into a journalism degree, Clark has already found himself in contact with several influential people thanks to his travels abroad. He arrives in the village in time to prevent an assassination attempt on Asuru; however, he acts in full public view without the aid of a costume for protection. Asuru quickly takes Clark under his tutelage, explaining the inherent danger of the neighboring tribe's

hegemony isn't political or economic, but the diminishment of their own socio-cultural values: “[. . .] the real threat is more insidious. The true threat comes from having our identity stolen. [. . .] When we lose our pride, we lose ourselves” (36). For Clark Kent, who himself lacks a personally-defined identity, Asuru's words and resolve to ensure a better, more stable future for his people become a frame of reference. Here, Waid bridges the gap between the original Superman who strove to eliminate social ills within a fairly campy urban setting and a hero who is not only aware of but also ready to face the serious challenges of discrimination, fascism and hegemony in the new century.

Sadly, Clark loses this surrogate parental figure when the leader of the neighboring tribe orchestrates an assassination attempt on Asuru. Unlike the previously mentioned orphaning device which leaves the protagonist alone to take up the struggle, Asuru's sister continues his campaign to join the national senate for political representation. Here, Waid seeks to create a hero that is grounded within humanity and a sense of community. This compassion will be the driving force for Waid's incarnation of Superman. For people who exist in the “real world,” there is no necessity to wear a costume to fight social injustice. Instead, the ideals behind the person are the driving force for protecting social justice. The first chapter concludes with a quiet reflection that sums up Clark's greatest personal desires: “Kobe Asuru will be remembered as a great man with a simple legacy. He was who he was. And the world will be a better place for it” (58). His words are almost prophetic in tone and yet remarkably layered in nature. Asuru, a character, who previously had not existed within the continuity of the DC Universe, is a summation of a true hero—a hero that Clark Kent now wishes to become. While other writers have correctly identified Clark's adoptive parents as a source of moral

inspiration, their actions have never been on the level of the sacrifice that Asuru makes for his people. Essentially, a true hero is willing to give his all, even his very life, for the sake of those whom he protects. This decision, and its relationship to the legacy of Superman, is by no means simple. Despite the various incarnations of the character, when the reader strips away the decades of continuity, all that is left left is a simple desire of someone who is different and who wants to make a difference.

With this new purpose in mind, Clark leaves Africa and returns to Smallville, Kansas, ready to embrace his past, present and future. Waid again takes the opportunity to add an additional layer of intertextuality of the mythos. The relationship between Clark and his adoptive parents is a complex one wrought with tension because of his differences and yet embraced because he is their child. The son is intended to be progenitor of the family line and the direct recipient of the life lessons given by his or her parents. While Jonathan Kent knows his adoptive son is neither truly his—nor even human—he cannot help but express a sense of disappointment at Clark's desire to embrace his Kryptonian heritage and fashion a new identity. Martha attempts to rebuff her husband's disappointment:

The problem is, Clark's going through a huge change, and all this talk about his destiny and his heritage . . . it's a lot for him to deal with. You were always good at keeping his feet on the ground, Jonathan. Talk to him. Maybe he comes from the stars, but he needs to be reminded he's just like you and me. (73)

Jonathan is quick to assert the essential problem in Martha's retort: Clark is not human—no matter how much he pretends to be. Clark is a changed man from the young boy of eighteen who left the Kent family farm seven years prior. He is not the same Clark that Jonathan was accustomed to; he is an adult capable of plotting his own course. However,



The addition of Kobe Asuru to the Superman mythos is twofold: Asuru's death marks a second act of orphaning and teaches Clark Kent a valuable lesson in heroics and sacrifice (Waid 58).

Clark is quick to assure his family that he does not want to lose the person he has become thanks to their upbringing. Instead, Clark wants to create a dual-identity that will allow him to operate within the public sphere yet maintain a private personage that is able to retreat and exist without the constant pressure of being the superhero. Reynolds describes the reason why Superman's future identity is so closely tied to Martha and Johnathan Kent: “[. . .] the character's development as a superhero must encompass evolving relationships with parents or substitute parental figures. The most satisfying and enduring superheroes have incorporated the familiar emotional landscape of adolescence into their developing superhero mythology” (61).

Clark Kent thus departs for the epicenter of the DC Universe: Metropolis. With this move, he crosses the threshold into adulthood. Armed by both the tutelage and moral example of his adoptive parents and the sacrificial example of Kobe Asuru, Clark Kent is ready to serve others. The sacrifices made by Jor-El and Asuru bookend this introductory portion of *Birthright* as both men have demonstrated that serving the greater good is not an easy decision and will often place a true hero on the social fringe. At the same time, Clark enjoys the ever present figures of Jonathan and Martha Kent, who fill the emotional void left by the absence of Jor-El and Asuru.

The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter-ego. Certain taboos will govern the actions of these alter-egos.

One of the classic questions of Superman's dual-identity is which identity is real and which simply a personae created out of a need for convenience. While each identity serves a specific function, placing a greater importance on one over the other only

reiterates and enforces the sense of isolation Clark Kent feels while on his spiritual quest around the world. Waid argues that the reader (and any writer) of Superman should not distinguish between the two identities but see the two facades connected through a process of self-actualization: “(Kal-El) ultimately connects by embracing (his) heritage—by creating as an adult a new identity for himself that is as Kryptonian as Clark Kent is human. Kal-El knows instinctively that it is only when he puts his gifts to use that he truly feels alive and engaged” (8). However, this form of engagement is possible only thanks to the moral identity fashioned through the guise of Clark Kent.

The secret identity is a reluctant necessity for Clark Kent. In order to be an effective hero, he must operate within full public view, meaning that he is unable to wear a mask like other heroes. Superman must expose himself to full public scrutiny if he is to gain their trust. While adopting a mask would seem to be the easiest solution to the problem, and the route embraced by other cape-and-cowled heroes, the mask still represents a barrier of trust between the savior and the saved. An additional complexity of this public exhibition is that people become retroactively paranoid about who he really is once they become aware that he is uniquely different from other humans. If he is willing to hide a major fact about himself, then what else might he be hiding from them? But because regular people see themselves as unable to interact with this kind of a demigod, he needs another identity people are capable of living and working alongside, Clark Kent.

However, the Clark Kent of the past twenty-five years suffers as a result of this necessity. Clark Kent must be transformed into someone else when adopting the heroic identity. In turn, a confident and gifted Clark adopts the persona of the mild-mannered Daily Planet reporter who is often the recipient of the scrutiny and abuse of his fellow co

workers. How then does our hero hide his most distinguishable characteristics—his impressive physique and demeanor? The simple response is through baggy clothing, overly well kempt hair and large glasses. Jonathan and Martha reasonably assume that Clark's physique can be altered through appropriate costuming, but not so easily discarded is Clark Kent's strong personality. That difficulty is part of the reason why Metropolis is an effective base of operations. Clark Kent must blend into the *crowd*. He must be an indistinguishable one of many. He must be a nonentity.

Norbert Elias' concerns over the performance of identity in nonfiction and memoir are similar to notion of the other identity at play in superhero genre:

What are often conceptually separated as two different substances or two different strata within the human being, his "individuality" and his "social conditioning," are in fact nothing other than two different functions of people in their relation to each other, one of which cannot exist without the other. They are terms for the specific activity of the individual in relation to his fellows, and for his capacity to be influenced and shaped by their activity; for the dependence of others on him and his dependence on others; expressions for his function as both die and coin. (qtd. in Eakin 65-66)

In holding to Elias' ideas, we can ascribe the Clark Kent and Superman persona as both the "individuality" and the "social conditioning." In the first few chapters of *Birthright*, Clark Kent is an isolated, individualistic person in search of his identity and place in the world. His means of ending this quest is to adopt the "socially conditioned" heroic persona of Superman; however, he cannot fully realize the concept of heroism without taking into consideration the moral upbringing by the Kents. At the same time, Superman is such a unique figure that it also accomplishes the role of "individualism." This transience is essential to understanding the fluidity of identity and the danger of giving preference to one over the other. The use of a third identity only further

complicates Clark's identity.

When Clark arrives at the *Daily Planet* for a job interview, Editor-In-Chief Perry White experiences difficulty believing that the timid and bumbling man in his presence is the same Clark Kent who interviewed supreme court justices, heads of terrorist organizations and other major figures from around the world—including the late Kobe Asuru. For a brief moment, the passive Clark Kent fades away as he explains that being at the center of news and knowing when and where things are happening is central to his life. This show of confidence is quickly swept away when Clark catches himself and knocks over a cup on ink pens from White's desk. Les Daniels explains in *Superman: The Complete History* the reasons why Siegel and Shuster would require Kent to tone down himself for the sake of a public facade as well as its relation as a literary device:

Nobody was more downtrodden than poor Clark Kent, who in that first issue was thoroughly humiliated by various bullies and also by his colleague Lois Lane. Superman's decision to walk among humans disguised as the humble Kent was part of a classical tradition that included heroes like Homer's Odysseus and Shakespeare's Henry V. That Kent is no more than a mask for Superman is shown clearly in the brief origin story [. . .] that would be expanded and elaborated with each retelling over the years. (36-7)

Waid has taken this description one step further in questioning the simplicity of Siegel and Shuster's analysis. The question of the Kent/Superman duality continues to be discussed with each new variation on the motif.

The problem of the dual identity is further complicated when Superman encounters the narrative's central antagonist—Lex Luthor. Much like the relationship between the two characters established in the television series *Smallville*, Waid continues the assumption that the young Clark Kent and Lex Luthor were not only once acquaintances of one another, but were close friends. This portion of the plot is fleshed out once

Superman has diverted a major Luthor-based attack on Metropolis. Waid establishes that there is an inherent tension between Luthor and Clark before he arrives at the source of that tension. As a teenager, Luthor quickly finds that Clark is the only person in the “hick town” of Smallville to whom he can relate. In the same way that Clark Kent has always sought out others who share his similarities, Luthor is in need of an equal in order to be both socially and intellectually fulfilled. A child genius, Luthor both easily and purposely alienates the people around him. It is only because Clark possesses super intelligence that he is able to keep up and is invited into Lex's confidence.

When Clark and Lex meet once more as adults Luthor pretends to have no recollection of Clark or ever living in Smallville. This past is a part of Luthor's life which he has gone to great lengths to erase from public memory and discussion. Luthor's resolve to forget about Smallville creates the dramatic irony at play in the conflict. Because he claims that nothing good ever came out of Smallville, Luthor does not expect anything from Clark Kent. The mendacity that pervades Luthor's perception is one element of the hubris that keeps the super genius from establishing a link between Clark Kent and the Man of Steel. The reader would normally conclude that someone of Luthor's intelligence and exposure to Clark Kent would quickly discover Superman's identity and disclose it to the public. Instead, Luthor is more concerned with the manufactured, heroic identity of Superman. Many of Clark's fears are put to ease by his father who notes, “[Luthor's] not looking for Clark, remember? 'Nothing good will ever come out of this hick town but Lex Luthor [. . .] Even if he wanted to connect Superman to Smallville, his ego wouldn't allow it” (195). Luthor is able to conclude that Superman is an alien being—a fact that he exploits to draw criticism, suspicion and public mistrust of the

caped hero. While Clark has to hide his extraordinary abilities through a secondary persona, Luthor unabashedly parades his intelligence to the world. The fact that there is a being from another planet that diminishes his control over other humans is the ultimate insult to his accomplishments and future plans.

Luthor, as the symbol of both humanity's realized potential and its worst greed, plots to turn the citizens of Metropolis against their new hero. When he publicly claims that Superman is a being from another planet, Kal-El's worst fears come true. He is treated as a menace, or worse feared as the advance guard for a race of alien conquerors thanks to fabricated photos created by Luthor. The singular power that he has over Superman is that he has tapped into a solar transmitter that is broadcasting images of Krypton's past through space. Unlike Clark, Luthor is able to translate these messages into an understandable format. When confronted by Superman, Luthor delights in a moment of shifted power.

Until this point, Clark has assumed that other beings like him existed in the universe and that he would someday make contact with those from his planet. It is much to the surprise of the newly enlightened Luthor that Superman is fully unaware of his heritage or even home planet. Luthor rejoices in explaining, "Forgive me, I cannot resist. Hold on. I need my cellphone camera for this. Ready? Okay. Your homeworld . . . your race . . . your parents? All dead. Gone. Scattered to the celestial winds. As far as the universe is concerned, Superman...you are completely and utterly alone" (212). The candor that Luthor exhibits while recounting Superman's past creates a highly uncomfortable scene for the reader. The fact that the reader is already familiar with the details of Luthor's speech should soften the rhetorical blow given to Superman.

However, since the reader has joined Kal-El in his quest for identity and belonging, the fact that his past would be so callously explained is a major insult to both Superman and his literary identity.

Perhaps, then, our best response is to view identity out of necessity. The Superman identity is adopted to protect his family and other innocents associated with Clark. The oafish Clark Kent allows him to be placed at the center of breaking news and placate suspicion. The Kryptonian Kal-El is the dual standard that amplifies and inspires Clark to be a hero. The Clark Kent who opens and concludes the narrative is the synthesis of all these characters. In the opening pages of *Birthright* he has yet to adopt—and in some cases even know about—these other aspects of his personality. The traces of each part of his identity are there, but have yet to be realized. It is only through the completion of his quest that Clark Kent emerges as a self-actualized person both willing and able to negotiate three very different parts of himself. John Byrne, when writing his origin of Superman *The Man of Steel* (1986), dealt with this same concern: “After all, Clark Kent was who he really was, who he’d been most of his life. Superman was just a red and blue suit he wore.” When Byrne was a boy, the comic had emphasized the Kryptonian heritage of Superman, but now the emphasis was on how well he functioned as an inhabitant of Earth (Daniels 160-1).

Within the postmodern context that Waid is writing, the natural inclination is to treat any narrative scenario with a sense of skepticism. After all, these are only fictional figures who will leave the reader's mind once the graphic novel has been placed aside, but the comic book form lends itself to a certain emotional investment on the part of the reader. While there is a desire for a very present sense of realism in the work, the genre

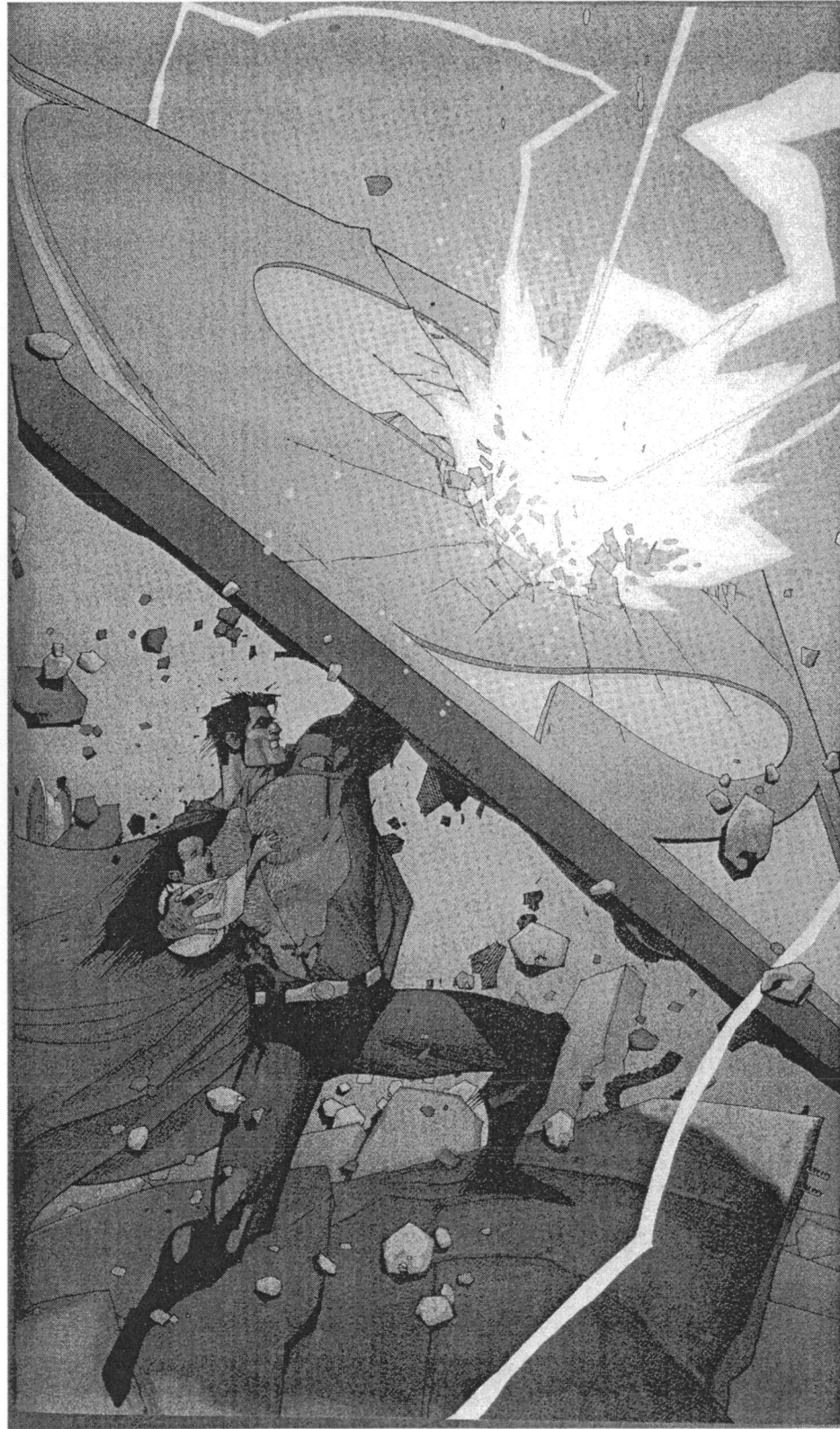
of comic books is also meant to embody a sense of hope. As previously mentioned, Superman has taken his lead from other moral figures in hopes of being not only a better person himself, but also a catalyst for social change. However, the line that Waid treads is very precarious. Delving too far into sentimentality robs Superman of the strength associated with a superhero (which is often the criticism levied against many contemporary Superman authors). At the same time, a Superman grounded in humanity must be able to feel and embrace emotions. Just as embracing emotion is important for Waid's protagonist, the catharsis afforded the reader is important in establishing the narrative.

In this case, the so-called Man of Steel bends like plastic under Luthor's revelation. Emotional brutality is not a substitution for Kryptonite in *Birthright*, but its effects are far longer lasting. Kal-El knows himself to be an extraordinary being, but the loneliness he had finally assuaged by creating a sense of belonging through his powers has once again isolated him. Clark Kent has worked so hard to stoically maintain a mild-mannered personality that will give him the freedom to act as Superman. However, this dual identity often causes him to be isolated. With Luthor's plan proving effective, Superman is alienated even from the people he wants to help; moreover, the revelation of his singularity only further sends Superman into emotional isolation. When Luthor launches a fake Kryptonian invasion to fully discredit Superman and establish Luthor as his people's savior, Clark throws in the towel. He writes in an email to his mother, “[Luthor’s] won. This city is his. Any second now, he’ll swoop in to the ‘rescue’ just to seal the deal—and all I can do is WATCH” (234). While this reaction is counterintuitive to everything the reader has learned about Clark Kent, it is a reasonable response for a

regular person; however, it is not an acceptable response for a true hero. Waid understands the notion that a superhero must maintain some form of ethos with the reader if the story is to have a positive effect. Superman must realize his own potential and act with confidence if he is to be perceived by the reader as a hero.

During the invasion, Luthor's fake Kryptonian army has co-opted the famous "S" symbol as part of their identity. The leader of the forces proclaims to the citizens of Metropolis, "As of now, we place our brand upon you. Know it. It is the symbol by which Krypton shall be forever remembered by the human race" (237). Once more Waid has employed subversion in his construction of the Superman identity. This profaning of a major Kryptonian symbol directly contrasts with the scene where Clark and Martha create the Superman costume based on the "S" flag placed in his space pod. Based on the e-book's photographs, Clark had already concluded the "S" was an extremely important part of his heritage. The fact that it would be co-opted by a force causing destruction instead of resolution is the antithesis to what he seeks to accomplish. His determined response to its misuse is simply, "Like hell" (240). Lenill Francis Yu, the graphic novel's pencil artist, illustrates a magnificent scene where Superman protects a young girl using a massive "S" shield he removed from one of the armored vehicles (Waid 255). Even though the symbol has been ripped off his costume, the logo plays a pivotal role in establishing his identity as that of protector of humanity and Kryptonian identity.

The costume is just as important in contrasting the mundane Clark Kent from Superman. Even the bold primary colors of red, yellow and blue create a spectacle of themselves. Clark wants to be noticed as Superman. Only then will he have the full trust of the citizens of Metropolis. Richard Reynolds further adds to this discussion by



In Birthright, Waid develops the “S” shield as more than simply a part of Superman’s costume. The “S” is a privileged symbol of Kal-El’s Kryptonian identity (255).

identifying the costume as the most crucial sign of super-heroism: “It marks out heroes (and villains) from other characters who do not wear costumes. In this sense, costume functions as a uniform, binding together all super-beings and costumed characters in contrast to the non-costumed ordinary world” (26).

To further add to this distinction, Waid addresses the reason he located the “S” symbol within the context of Kryptonian historical identity: “A flag always signals a sense of distinctiveness, achievement, and pride. It roots any individual who braces it in the past, and in a people, while at the same time preparing him to live in the present and launch out into the prospect of a meaningful future with a sense of tradition, direction, and value” (9). It comes as no surprise that the manufactured Clark Kent is so different from the symbolic Superman. While the convictions and the mentality of both figures are identical, the public perception of each character could not be more isolated on the spectrum. These differences protect the real Clark Kent from those who would wish him or Superman harm. Most of all, such exaggerated characteristics of his two identities allow a real person to comfortably exist somewhere in between.

The stories are mythical and use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder.

Even though Clark Kent is a mild-mannered reporter for a metropolitan newspaper, much of his world is centered around scientific discovery and change. One would naturally assume that this is a construct instituted by Waid in order to make Superman a more believable character in a culture that requires scientific validation for even the most

minute activity. However, a study of *Superman #1* proves the assumption to be false. A page in that first issue entitled “A Scientific Explanation of Superman's Powers” was the idea of the editor to better attract the speculative fiction audiences and blend the emerging comic book genre with such forms as the pulp mystery and crime novels. While the scientific explanations have become more precise over the years, it would appear as though Superman has become virtually invincible, but if there is no danger of harm as a results of his actions, then one cannot describe his actions as being heroic. Superman is unlike many other heroes in that he is not given powers by the gods or magical devices that are at his employ. In reality, one of Superman's greatest weaknesses is his vulnerability to magic. If science cannot topple the Man of Steel, the natural substitution is magic.

Science is the fallacy that opens the narrative in *Birthright*. Jor-El, the leading scientist of the planet Krypton, has his doomsday theory rebuffed by the scientific ruling council. Jor-El successfully predicts the destruction of their planet by the growing gravitational forces of the Red Giant star the planet orbits. Despite Jor-El's unprecedented intelligence, even he is unsure if his plan to send the infant Kal-El to another planet will be successful. The move is very much a scientific gamble, but it enforces a theme of experimentation at play in the text. Jor-El deduces that Earth's environment, which boasts energy from a yellow sun, will be the most effective stratagem for ensuring Kal-El's survival. He explains that the cellular structure of the boy will drink up the solar energy and provide an unlimited source of power.

I have already established that Clark Kent grows up unaware of his heritage or even the sources of his powers. It takes a lecture from Lex Luthor to map out to Superman just

exactly why he is so super. Luthor initially assumes that Superman is employing technology as the means of his power. Luthor has always been famous for his use of science to create tools for his own disposal so that he may level the playing field between himself and Superman. Because Luthor, an acclaimed astrobiologist, has yet to find traces of alien life, he reaches the natural conclusion that Superman must be outfitted with the latest gadgetry. While much of the Superman mythology eschews magic in its most basic forms, technology serves as a intermediary between the “hard science” world that gives Kal-El his powers and other magical/supernatural entities in the DC Universe. Technology so appropriately works in this instance because it gives the instinctive illusion that one has powers beyond the norm. Technology provides the same mystical effects as magic because the end result is normally extrahuman and produced with little apparent effort on the part of its user.

By cataloging Superman's powers, Luthor quickly deducts that the Man of Steel's powers must stem from an extraterrestrial source. Luthor explains to the investigative reporters Kent and Lane the world of Superman's origin: “A megagravity planet dwarfing Jupiter, orbiting a star emitting only the dimmest of red light. By my calculations, these—and only these—are the environment factors which would force a humanoid to evolve ocular nerves and cellular tissue to Superman's exact specifications” (146). While Luthor has successfully reconstructed the general constructs of the planet Krypton, the accompanying artwork of the page provides some intertextual commentary. The landscape Luthor envisions is a bleak red planet with barren and mountainous landscape—far from the advanced Utopian society presented in the open sequence of the novel. Perhaps Luthor's vision of Krypton is not unlike his vision of Smallville—

Luthor's skepticism of anyone or thing other than himself is sure to be less polished, suitable, and useful.

There is a strange dichotomy at work between Luthor and Jor-El. Both men are the most brilliant scientists of their respective worlds, and both are just as misunderstood by their own people. Science has become a refuge to them but encourages them to act in isolation from all others. Fortunately, Jor-El has his wife Laura to keep him grounded and provide a sense of hope despite the increasing bleak data. This use of Lara's character is not unique to the mythos. Similarly, Waid flushes out the story of the connection between young Clark Kent and Lex Luthor by using both boys' fascination with science and astronomy as a similar interest. As previously noted, Clark is the only person in Smallville who is remotely able to exist on Luthor's mental plane. Once Luthor's relationship with Clark goes sour due to a misunderstanding, Luthor loses the one person that keeps him grounded in his humanity. The corrupted scientist Luthor is concerned only with the financial gain and fame his accomplishments will afford himself. In contrast, Jor-El should be read as an unappreciated savior who suffers from the irony that no one will listen to his correct assertions.

While a vulnerability to magic has been labeled as one of Superman's weaknesses, Waid turns to the most common weakness associated with Superman--a weaknesses that is rooted in science. In earlier narratives, the science of Kryptonite was relatively unexplained. The idea didn't even originate with Siegel and Shuster. Recall their Superman was far more human—possessing only the ability to leap, not fly, thanks to the reduced gravitational environment; increased speed; and imperviousness to bullets. Kryptonite was introduced in the 1950's radio drama as a means of defeating the

otherwise undefeatable Superman. Through the years, the device would become a blessing and a curse for writers of the character. By the 1970's many plots were convoluted with complex explanations of why the villain of the week could possibly beat Superman, or the writer simply said, "Let's use Kryptonite."

Waid does scientifically justify the use of Kryptonite within his narrative. The rock emits a radiation that is unique to Krypton. Since Superman is the only person with the genetic makeup, it becomes a counter agent. Since Kal-El is now accustomed to the environment of Earth and its yellow sun, he is incapable of dealing with the effects of exposure to his native environment. While he has been conditioned to accept the environment of Earth, he is unable to adapt to any semblance of his homeworld. This limitation should be taken as ironic since Clark wants nothing more than to have some connection to the planet Krypton. The source of his fascination can also act as the source of his demise. Kryptonite is also an interesting device in that when Superman encounters it, he must face the question of heroism. The element reduces Superman's abilities or eliminates them altogether. With the powers that makes him so super temporarily limited, he only has the capacity to act as Clark Kent. While the costume may reflect the icon of



Kryptonite has often been a blend of magic and science. The element acts as one of few means of breaking Superman's invincibility (Waid 281).

Superman, the inner strength and resolve at this point stems from his human persona. As previously mentioned, there must be some inherent threat in performing heroic deeds.

By using these three tenants to frame both a reading of *Birthright* as well as understanding the motivations for its creation, we encounter the Superman for the twenty-first century: a hero who remains true to form, but has the sensibilities necessary to be accepted within his contemporary context. As Reynolds so effectively notes, “Superheroes are not called upon to act as the protagonists of individual plots. [. . .] The superheroes are the protagonists of the myth which is constructed” (51-52). The duality at play in Reynold's sentiment further serves to prove the rich intertextuality at work in *Birthright*. Superman emerges from Waid's tale as a figure who is nuanced and complex, an alien who is full of humanity and is, most of all, a hero. When Waid was writing the first issues of the series, he had no clue that DC was planning his version of Superman to be the official, canonical text that future Superman scribes would adhere to. When readers openly embraced this new version of Superman, their support extended the credibility necessary and demonstrated that Waid's Superman resonated with readers. *Birthright* presents an addition to the Superman mythology that is faithful to the texts that have come before it and has already begun to inspire those who hold the keys to Superman's future exploits.

WHEN TOMORROW BECOMES TODAY

*This is an imaginary story
(which may never happen, then again may)
about a perfect man who came from the sky and did only good.
It tells of his twilight, when the great battles were over
and the great miracles long since performed;
of how his enemies conspired against him and of that final war
in the snowblind wastes beneath the Northern Lights;
of the women he loved and of the choice he made between them;
of how he broke his most sacred oath, and how finally all the things
he had were taken from him save one.
It ends with a wink.
It begins in a quiet midwestern town, one
summer afternoon in the quiet midwestern future.
Away in the big city, people still sometimes glance up hopefully from
the sidewalks, glimpsing a distant speck in the sky...but no: it's only a
bird, only a plane – Superman died ten years ago.*

*This is an IMAGINARY STORY...
Aren't they all?
---Alan Moore*

Superman has often been called The Man of Tomorrow since his powers are so far beyond the limitations of contemporary human beings. As a symbol of the potential to be something greater than ordinary, Superman acts as a moral compass. Even though his abilities are greater than anything other than the human imagination, he still chooses to use those powers to benefit the very people who are beneath him. As the comic superhero archetype, he is the figure that is often emulated when a new hero takes to the pages of comics. Moreover, Superman is a figure that is unparalleled in both his universality and his inscription into the cultural consciousness.

But what happens when “tomorrow” comes?

As I have explored in the first chapter, comics scribes have often reexamined the nature of the Superman character in order to make him relevant for each new generation of comic book readers. It is through these retellings that the mythology around the character is canonized. Superman stories will always contain Metropolis, The Daily Planet, Lois Lane and Lex Luthor. One cannot have a Superman story without these

elements, for each is just as important to telling a Superman story as the symbolic “S” shield.

The deconstructive comic book efforts of the 1980's and hallmark texts such as Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* challenged authors' conceptions as to the identity and very nature of our most famous superheroes. The “yesterday” Golden Age of moral absolutes and fantasy, along with the Silver Age of social awareness and nontraditional heroes, eventually gave way to a gritty and bleak present in the comics industry. There is an inherent feeling of doubt concerning what more can be done with the superhero. Does such a figure make sense where the national mentality can be equated to a color-coded terror alert system? It is with this skeptical eye that some of the most famous comic writers have reapproached the Superman mythology. Their questioning the canonical elements of the mythos and asking why it is that this character and his precepts are so valued gives the audience a chance to respond and, in turn, find a new appreciation for what is often labeled an all-too-familiar character that is seen as more of an anachronism than *the* archetype.

This portion of the study focuses on three Superman texts that take the Man of Steel out of his typical duties. Each story pays tribute to the previously noted mythemes, or tidbits of comic continuity, but the emphasized portion of the narrative is a Superman who has seen tomorrow come and is not quite ready to continue the never-ending battle. Mark Waid and Alex Ross' *Kingdom Come* (1996) addresses the next generation of metahumans in costumes who choose not to subscribe to the ideologies of yesterday's heroes—most notably those of Superman. Scholars have often likened superheroes to gods—some characters, such as Thor, are explicit recreations of classic deities. *Kingdom*

Come embraces the religious undertones frequently found in comics and takes it to an apocalyptic level. In a sense, Superman returns to become the savior of humanity, but turns out to be more of an antihero than a superhero. Waid and Ross' Christian frame mirrors the path of a well-intentioned Messiah whose actions are not executed as planned. The text questions the use of power and the responsibility associated with super heroics.

Mark Millar's *Red Son* is an alternate Superman story that supposes the Last Son of Krypton landed in the Soviet Union in the early part of the twentieth century rather than the quaint midwestern farmland of Jonathan and Martha Kent. Truth, justice and the American way give way to a dystopic future and a totalitarian Comrade Superman whose intentions are questionable at best. Millar's work is a cautionary political tale that is relentless in its nods to the classic and most basic elements of the Superman mythos; however, by placing Superman in a radically different context, *Red Son* challenges the question the practice of labeling Superman as an American hero rather than one for the world.

Finally, Alan Moore's *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow* is an imaginary story that supposes itself to be the final Superman story ever. While not accepted as a part of the official continuity (and thus noncanonical), the narrative reviews the previous yesterdays in hope of explaining the importance of the tomorrows that lie ahead. Moore's work is meant to bookend the mythology and solve the problem that Reynolds poses in regards to appreciating the mythology of comic books. *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow* completes the metatext of Superman and does what readers hope will never happen. It ends the never-ending battle.

While each tale is, in itself, strikingly different, there is a common theme that links

these important texts: at their heart is the most basic Superman story—one that reminds the reader of the values at work in *Birthright* and all other canonical Superman texts. Superman does not fail in his attempt to spread good and eliminate evil. That simple statement is why these three stories, which basically create a Superman that fails in some way, evoke such a dramatic response from the reader. The names Waid, Millar and Moore carry heavy clout within the comics community. The basic suppositions of these three texts, placed in the hands of lesser writers, would work only to diminish the character of Superman; however, in these well-placed hands, one cannot help but better appreciate the Superman who has remained a cultural icon when faced with these lesser versions. Truth and Justice are often concepts that simply seem unknowable by our modern standards. It may then be that we come close to understanding them through the actions of Superman.

To borrow from Moore's preface to *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?*, “This is an imaginary story...aren't they all?” Indeed, superhero narratives are often taken with a certain wink and nod, but for the most dedicated audiences, these revisionist narratives provide a chance to reexamine the very essence of heroism so that when we approach the current Superman stories, we remember why he stands above all the other heroes and villains.

Tomorrow is today.

Kingdom Come: Whose Will Be Done?

Kingdom Come (1996) is beyond the Golden and Silver Ages of comic books. It moves even beyond our unnamed contemporary period and beyond the ageless sense of time that exists within these narrative worlds. The future has given itself over to a new generation of superheroes—the offspring of such classic figures as Batman, Green Lantern, The Flash, Robin and countless (often more obscure) others. The earth of *Kingdom Come* has not been inherited by the meek, but by this generation of reckless, brash and self-stylized heroes.

Waid's scenario is apocalyptic: these metahumans have become so out of control that the Specter—God's supernatural agent of judgment and a Golden Age hero himself—must judge these heroes in order to reestablish some sort of balance to the world that has given itself over to violence and lost morals. However, the Specter has long since forgotten what it means to be human and chooses a faith-deficient minister named Norman McKay to serve as his spiritual guide along the way. Rooted in morality and old enough to remember a period of superheroes who lived in moral absolutes, McKay must passively watch as the tensions between the old and the new build to a head. One must acknowledge the Christian overtones in the narrative.

Felix Tallon and Jerry Walls' essay “Superman and *Kingdom Come*: The Surprise of Philosophical Theology” establishes the Christian frame and a theological basis for the graphic novel. They explain why a Christian context is appropriate for understanding superheroes:

Since it seems that naturalism drives a wedge between truth and justice, or in other words, between our feelings of moral obligation and our

explanation for it, let us propose a system that explains more feeling, and gives solid grounds for moral obligation. Simply put, a metaphysical view of reality that allows a real place for moral principles and for objective distinctions between good and evil, along with an eschatology that allows for an appropriate system of reward and punishment, can resolve the tension.

The view of Christian theism obviously affirms this with its idea of a morality concerned, personal Creator, and its doctrines of heaven and hell, as well as with its anticipations of the return of Christ. (216-17)

Waid builds upon each of these Christian elements when approaching the Superman mythos in the text. He assumes his readership will have a working knowledge of this Christian ideology and that they will be both willing and able to make the connections between the world of religion and the world of comic books.

In *Kingdom Come*, Superman has been absent for over a decade. After the a new hero named Magog, who doesn't exhibit the restraint or social niceties of Superman, emerges and gains notoriety, along with preference among the citizens of Metropolis, Superman decides that the world no longer needs him and chooses a personal state of exile at his arctic Fortress of Solitude. It is only after the new generation of heroes instigate an atomic blast during a battle, and irradiates a major portion of the Midwest along the way, that Wonder Woman convinces him to return to the forefront and once again inspire the outmoded Golden Age heroes to return as well.

Superman acts with totalitarian efficiency, using the fact that all other heroes look to him for a final decision. His response is for these young heroes to act responsibly or be placed in The Gulag—a metahuman prison meant to securely monitor and prevent these rogue heroes from hurting the humans they supposedly protect. This decision is not made without tension from Batman and other human heroes who believe that humanity's reliance on aliens and mutants to save them has only stymied their potential for

achievement. The Mankind Liberation Front believes humanity needs to solve its own problems without outside interference. This three-way tension between Golden Age heroes, the next generation of metahumans and human hero leaders builds to a final battle that is ended only through an atomic bomb deployed by the United Nations. The few heroes who survive the nuclear attack conclude their masks and secret identities are no longer necessary. While heroes like Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman are blessed with powers and skills beyond the norm, they were never meant to alone solve problems for humanity, but rather alongside them, in equal dedication. As such, *Kingdom Come* ends in a sense of renewal that promises true heroism is an achievable goal. It simply takes a reminder every now and then.

What makes Superman such an influential character within the DC Universe is that he willingly assumes the role of leadership within the DC pantheon. As a leader, he has never campaigned for the role of “chief hero.” It is solely through his example that other heroes choose to follow him. During Superman's absence, there is a palpable element missing from the old heroes. Without a cohesive entity to bind the heroes together, Waid effectively points out that the heroes become polarized by their own abilities. Green Lantern, who is predominantly concerned with the galactic heroes and villains, creates a fortress in space where he waits for threats. Wonder Woman remains on Paradise Island focusing on the interests of the Amazonian race. Batman stays in the Batcave and has turned to robot sentinels to patrol the streets of Gotham city. The Flash has limited his pursuits to a never-ending patrol of Keystone city. While such interests are always the foreground of each character—a specific protectorate that is uniquely their own—something else is missing. These characters were at the heart of the Justice League of

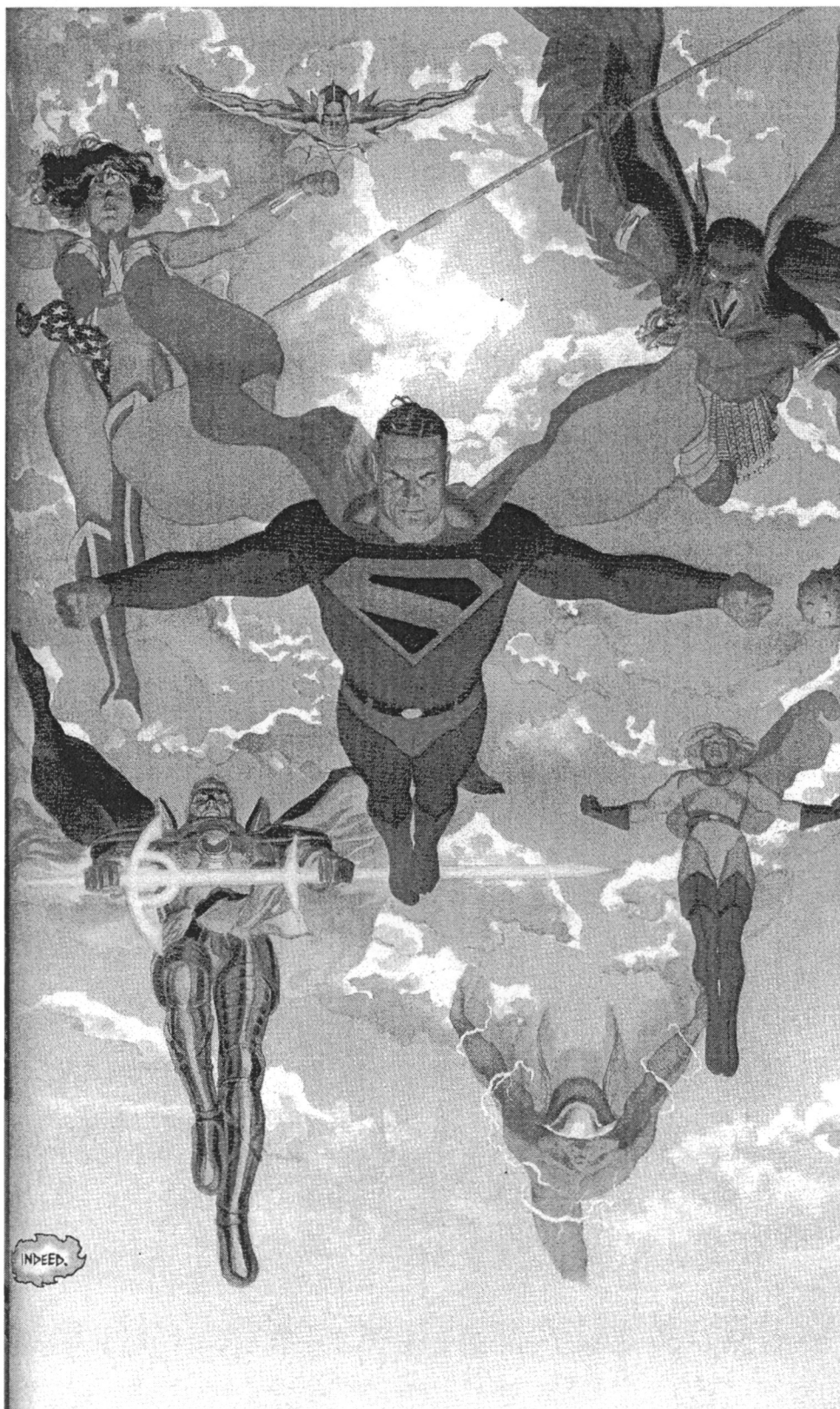
America (JLA). Based on cooperation for situations that were greater than the abilities of a singular hero, the JLA was a physical exhibition of teamwork and cooperation. With this sense of unity missing, it should come as no surprise that the current generation of heroes are just as—if not more—fractured and individualistic. Moreover, the new generation lacks their own locales and are seemingly nothing more than roaming gypsies looking for a fight—even when one is not necessary.

By blurring the lines between the heroes of DC's past and the potential heroes of its future, Waid addresses the concerns of a mythology in flux. Superman is placed in direct opposition with Magog over a murdering spree perpetuated by the Joker. After having killed several staffers at the *Daily Planet*, most notably the unmentioned Lois Lane, the superheroes scour Metropolis in search of Joker. Once the police have caught him and are leading him away to jail, Magog makes a definitive choice and murders Joker in front of the public and a slew of television cameras, while Superman descends from the sky—unable to stop him. Magog insists his actions were overdue—that Joker could have been stopped years before if the heroes would have only had the guts to act in a definitive way, but their allegiance to the Law always prevented that choice. While Magog is tried for murder, he is later acquitted of any criminal behavior because the citizens of Metropolis wanted order more than they were afraid of force. Insulted by this shift and being told his methods were antiquated, Superman went into exile.

This point of the plot raises a very important question: must morality and principle become transient ideologies that have to change in order to remain relevant? When Superman is confronted by Magog, the new hero justifies his brand of justice by complaining that Superman was both unwilling and unable to cope with a new world.

Magog retorts, “You're the one who let himself get strung up by the man on the street. [. . .] *Vox populi*, man. Out with the old, in with the new. Brighter, faster, meaner. [. . .] World's Oldest Boy Scout . . . but you wouldn't change. You wouldn't get in the step. You wouldn't flex with the times” (96). The difficulty in accepting Magog's justification is that in the classic comics, traditional ideas such as Truth and Justice are universal and do not change depending on time. What does change is the public perception and context of those ideas. Hence, Superman's ideology doesn't shift. Instead, it's the average citizen that believes the Man of Tomorrow is outdated according to the public opinion poll in an edition of the *Daily Planet* finds 77% of citizens show a preference for Magog; as the traditional ideologies personified, Superman cannot change. The faithful readers of Superman stories do not wish for him to change, as we have explored in the previous chapter. The end result of this conflict then is a radical divide between what is right and what is perceived as right. It also questions if the notions of Truth and Justice are contextual, whether ends can justify means. Does it make sense to allow Joker to continue to murder and cause trouble? Is it better to eliminate the threat in advance rather than allowing it to play out?

Despite Superman's protestations of this new brand of heroism, he makes a tragic mistake in over-compensating for his previous deficiencies. While the scenario with Joker worked out, Superman's execution of this same brand of justice is more complicated and far reaching. As a result, his executions are more prone to failure. As the leader of the newly reestablished JLA, he exerts an almost dictatorial control over not only his fellow JLA members, but also the new recruits who see the potential to be something greater. Superman shoulders the responsibility of the League as a whole and



*In this illustration from *Kingdom Come*, Superman and members of the JLA descend from on high. One does not have to look too deeply to notice several religious apocalyptic themes in the text (Waid 63).*

its pressure bends the will even of the Man of Steel. As an almost naïve character, Superman notes his reluctance to force people to view the world through his perspective. But Wonder Woman constantly reminds him that the heroes need a leader and the only qualified figure is Superman. This personality change is a role reversal of sorts. Wonder Woman, who is typically presented as an ambassador of peace, has been ousted from her people because of her perceived ineffectiveness. As a result, she trades her olive branch for a sword. Her rhetoric is often shaped by thoughts of war and battle—a flashpoint which she often foreshadows to Superman. While she preaches war, Superman warns, “Given who we are Diana...given the power we possess...we have a greater obligation to keep the peace” (125).

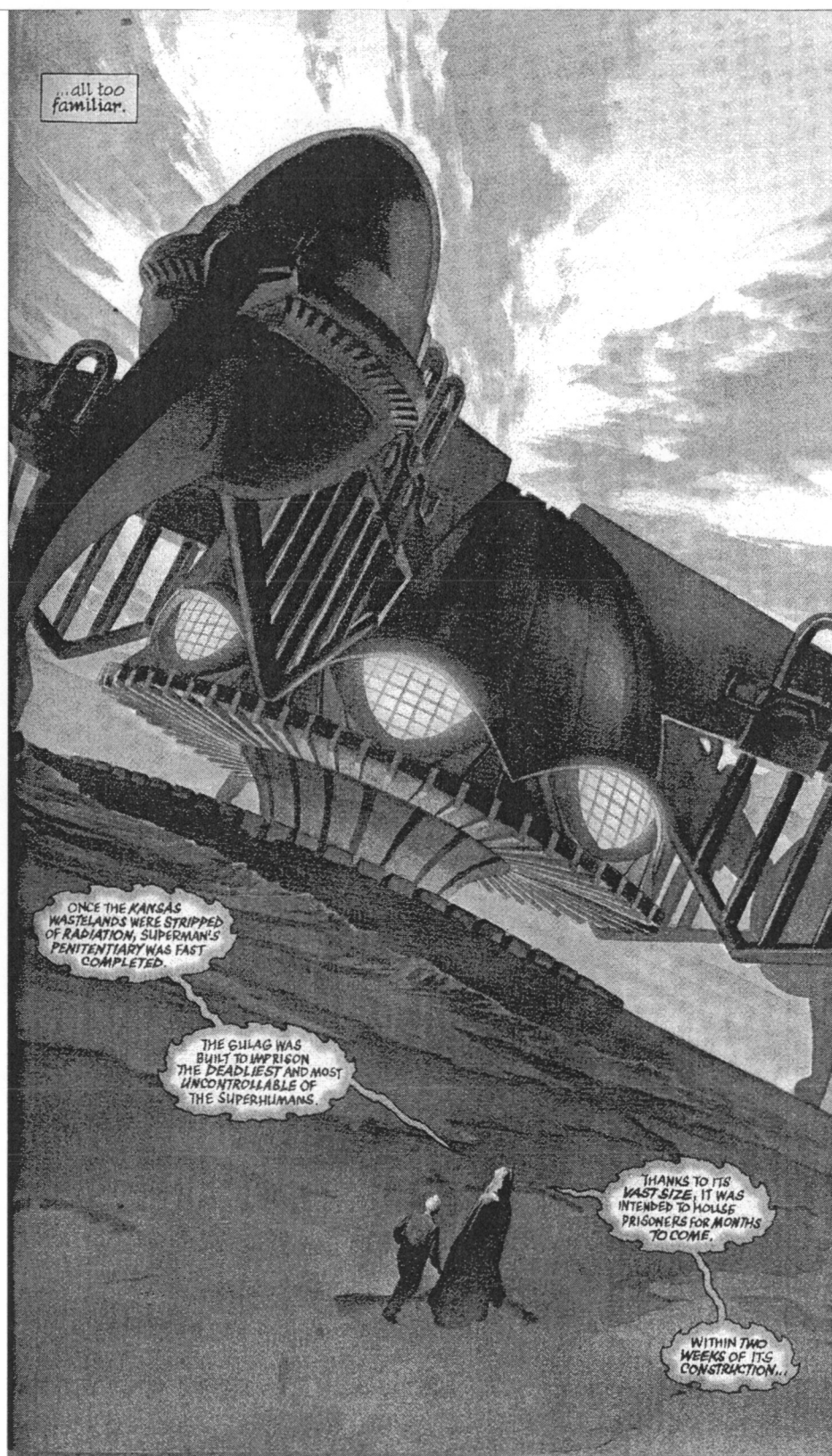
One must question Superman's actions of keeping the peace. If his solution is a totalitarian crackdown that requires anyone outside his narrowly defined sense of good and evil to be placed in the Gulag, how can he really be keeping the peace? His actions, in fact, further provoke the rogue metahumans. There is an inherent contradiction between Superman's request for a philosophy of peace that can be maintained only through the power of the Justice League. These major contradictions contribute to the overwhelming sense of tension at play in *Kingdom Come*. With the absolute value of good and evil as seeming pipe dreams, the shades of gray that fill the novel prove that a final conflict is on the horizon. If Superman and his JLA want a peace, they will have to take it. As such, the normally passive superheroes become active enforcers who step in to do a job that they are not asked to do.

There is a distinct parallel between Superman's Gulag and Michel Foucault's construct

of the Panopticon, as both units are meant to be the perfect prison, a structure that houses the most dangerous criminals with amazing efficiency while also acting as a profound deterrent to others who would consider violating the law. As Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, “the Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is a diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form” (205). How ironic that this ideal system of power and responsibility is utilized by the world's greatest Superhero. The decision to construct the Gulag weighs heavily on Superman, as it is atypical for heroes to have to police their own. Heroes should fall on the side of good, but this idealistic notion is one of the antiquated properties of *Kingdom Come*. *Kingdom Come* provides only one view of the facility from the outside (113). The structure is true to form with Jeremy Bentham's original designs: an expansive dome covering a pod-based circular facility. The overarching principle of the Gulag is in line with Foucault's view of the structure.

The Gulag is under the watchful eye of Scott Free, better known as the hero Mr. Miracle—a master of bonds and traps. While not centrally located in the facility, a massive series of video monitors provide the reader with the sense that Free has an ever-present eye on the inhabitants of the Gulag. The goal of the facility is not simply to house rogue metahumans, as the Specter explains to Norman McCay, its purpose is restorative and provides a space for the characters to learn to become responsible heroes (116). At the center is a holographic projection of Superman which spouts dogmatic revelations meant to win over the new generation of superhumans. Again, Superman embodies a Christ-like role by instructing the metahumans on the way to live and act:

Please understand our intent. None of you are here for punishment.
You're here for education. [. . .] The powers we have...the things we



Norman McCay and the Spectre stand outside Superman's Gulag. The structure and themes of the Gulag are similar and yet strikingly different to Foucault's interpretation of the Panopticon (113).

do...they're meant to inspire ordinary citizens...not intimidate them. Not terrify them. We cannot act as judge and jury. We adhere to a moral code based on the preservation of life. (117)

From Superman's viewpoint, the Gulag enacts the discipline Foucault ascribes to the prison, with favorable results. The facility acts as a space of contemplation where the individual is meant to be the sole enforcer of one's actions. The Gulag does not feature massive weaponry and guards as most incarceration facilities do; instead, the metahumans are meant to police themselves, albeit in a restrictive space. This self-discipline is also central to the theory of the Panopticon. However, the Panopticon is meant to be policed by the public, yet the Gulag under the sole control of Superman. While Foucault claims "there is no risk, therefore, that the increase of power created by the panoptic machine may degenerate into tyranny" (207), this is certainly what happens to the Gulag. Tired of being under Superman's control and collected in a space overcrowded with superhumans with a penchant for violence and unpredictability, the imprisoned start a riot that must be suppressed by the JLA.

The failure of the panoptic prison as well as the Gulag is that the system should render the actual use of power unnecessary (201). This is certainly not the case, as the riot at the Gulag is the catalyst that brings the metahuman conflict to its climax. The Gulag exists on the fringe of society in the nuclear wasteland formerly known as Kansas. Instead of being central to the functioning world, both the facility and its inhabitants exist on the fringe. Moreover, rather than existing as a means of truly instructing and reforming the superhumans who lack a sense of respect and purpose, their incarceration only further exacerbates the conflict between the aged and the petulant youth. There is no one to give power to and no acceptance of responsibility. While the Gulag does maintain the status

quo for a brief period of time, the prison fails to execute its ultimate goal of rehabilitation. While Superman and the concept of the Gulag exist within the confines of the ideal, the structure is a powder keg just waiting for a lighted fuse.

While the Gulag represents a localized use of power in the world of *Kingdom Come*, there is also a distinct difference in the way that superheroes deal with the inherent political structures at play in the future. In the past, the JLA had enjoyed a sense of cooperation with the United Nations and United States government; however, Superman's actions to police and imprison rogue members of the metahuman population is outside their given authority. The Gulag is operational without the knowledge and consent of the U.N. Only when a riot breaks out that threatens the security of the entire world does Superman have to make the legislative body aware of their covert actions. Waid has Superman acting counter to his nature time and time again as part of the recontextualization of the character. What seems strange about this decision is that Superman is fully aware that his decisions are not how he normally pursues his mission. Returning to the notion of the passive superhero, Superman typically acts only when someone is in trouble. The normal cries of "Help! Superman!" are a call to action followed by his response. In *Kingdom Come*, Superman, under Wonder Woman's influence, takes a more proactive stance in policing the metahuman community. Rather than being seen as a reactionary figure, one that Magog has already described as antiquated, Superman becomes a policy maker. While Superman is often sanctioned by governmental bodies, the character has never been allowed to directly interact in the political sphere.¹ The fact that he deviates from his typical pattern of behavior serves to

1 The most notable example of this is when Lex Luthor decides to run for U.S. President in the current continuity. Superman feels uncomfortable advocating or protesting a particular form of government—

reinforce how practical and situated the continuity-based Superman's actions are.

When the U.N. responds by unleashing a nuclear strike on the warring metahumans, Superman unleashes his rage on the officials. He tears apart the United Nations headquarters. Even to this point, Superman's rhetoric has taken precedence over his physical action. There is little of the “pow” and “biff” fight scenes that fill the more campy versions of comics. Superman is presented as a figure of reason and rhetoric, and Waid implicitly notes that words should be seen as more effective in shaping the new generation of heroes than the actual fighting—philosophy is valued over the practice itself. The pain, then, that Superman feels in being betrayed by those whom he returned, once more, to protect is almost too much to bear. As The Specter observes, “After ten years, he has finally let free a wrath that would cower Satan himself. How can any man possibly calm the fury he feels towards his persecutors?” (192). Several intriguing concepts are at play here. Superman is elevated to a status far beyond the power of any mortal human. He is even greater than the often perceived demigod Satan. His only equivalent is the Christian God who seems weaved into the text. While the Spectre has been characterized with executing the judgment of the Divine in *Kingdom Come*, Superman makes the critical decision instead of some outside force. In this case at the U.N., Superman acts as a righteous judge capable of handing out a final sentence on those who sin--those who are foolish enough to seek a final, decisive blow. The irony is that Superman himself has fallen prey to this same kind of absolutist reasoning. Moral absolutes, as Superman has discovered throughout the course of *Kingdom Come*, simply do not exist. Both heroes and villains exist on a similar plane within the varied shades of

even if it results in a government helmed by his archnemesis. *Superman/Batman Vol. 1* provides some wonderful background on this issue as well as other tensions between Superman and Luthor.

moral grays. There are no easy answers to the difficult questions of Truth, Justice and a new way. It is a lesson that both humans and metahumans learn through failure.

Another element that separates the Superman of *Kingdom Come* from the usual representations is that he lacks the human identity of Clark Kent. Once he has gone into exile, there is no more need of the bumbling oaf Kent to conceal his identity. In turning away from his role as a superhero, there is really even no need for the identity of Superman. All that remains is the alien from the planet Krypton—Kal-El. When Wonder Woman first arrives to seek out Superman's help, she greets him as Clark only to be met with an icy stare. She quickly corrects herself by calling him Kal. Kal-El exists in total seclusion from humanity, heroes and even his own race. In this situation, Superman is fully Otherized. He has lost the elements that make him an inspiring hero. By losing his connection to both Clark Kent and Superman, he is neither the typical Everyman nor the potential of human power and responsibility.

If Superman is unable to fill this void, then Waid selects the only DC hero who is capable of understanding both worlds and directly juxtaposes Superman with Captain Marvel. This is a highly appropriate comparison because Marvel has often been criticized as the most basic emulation of Superman. (A point which DC Comics had previously turned into litigation against Fawcett Comics until DC acquired the rights to the character.) There is a major difference that exists between the two figures: while Superman has given up his human identity, Captain Marvel has relinquished his heroic nature. Billy Batson, a young boy, transforms into the World's Mightiest Mortal by saying the name of the wizard Shazam. Saying the name once more transforms him back to a typical boy. Much like Superman, Marvel has not embraced his heroic identity for

years; however, he has existed as a regular human being growing into an adult over this period of time. The adult Batson is afraid of the power he possesses, as it is something that poses a danger because of its Otherness. Unlike Superman, though, Batson spans the worlds of humanity and heroes. He is the only figure that is fully capable of understanding the implications of superpowers in relation to the humans these superheroes swear to help and protect. It is with that in mind, that Marvel sacrifices himself to save both the heroes and humans. In an act of sacrifice, Marvel detonates in space the atomic bomb that is meant to wipe out the battling metahumans. While all of the heroes have been looking to Superman as the example of a hero in practice, Waide concludes the narrative by showing it takes a human to lead other humans—not an outsider. Superman concludes, “I asked (Captain Marvel) to choose between humans and superhumans. But he alone knew that as false division . . . and made the only choice that ever truly matters. He chose life in the hope that [the human world] and [the metahuman world] could be one world once again” (195-96). This speech alone is not enough to bridge the gap between Kal-El and humanity. The final scene is a heartfelt moment where Wonder Woman presents Kal with a pair of round spectacles in hopes of helping him “see more clearly.” Only by re-adopting the Kent persona is Superman fully resolved with humanity.

The collected graphic novel of *Kingdom Come* also includes an epilogue that brings together Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman (in their civilian identities) for a special revelation. While sharing a meal at the Planet Hollywood-inspired Planet Krypton restaurant, Clark and Diana ask Bruce if he is willing to be the godfather of their expected child. The implication is that a third generation of superheroes is on the

horizon, but most of all, the superpowered Clark and Diana want to make sure their child will be rooted in humanity—and no human hero is more apt to train a youth than Bruce. While he even admits that his record is less than spotless, he accepts the job. The narrative concludes with the following dialogue:

BRUCE: The child of Superman and Wonder Woman and Batman.

Imagine what kind of kid he'll--

DIANA: --She'll--

BRUCE: --be.

CLARK: Battler for Truth, Justice . . . and a new American Way. I can hardly wait to see it myself. Let's go home and dream about the future.

(212)

Critics of the epilogue have often complained that the final scene not only relegates the story to a basic sentimentality, but negates the stirring nature of the final scene of the original text. I am inclined to disagree with the skeptics. The final chapter marks the only scene in the novel where all three figures appear out of costume. They have actualized the earlier promise of embracing their humanity. With this ending, there is an additional element of hope that exists for not only humanity, but the heroes themselves. Two generations of heroes have now learned from their errors with the hope of a new Golden Age on the horizon. With a nod to the comic book genre, one cannot expect the story to ever actually conclude. The sense of timelessness that is essential to comic books is upheld with the promise of more stories to come.

As Elliot S! Maggin states in the preface to *Kingdom Come*, “Mark and Alex draw a dichotomy between the human race and what we call the metahuman race. It is the source of conflict throughout the story. And the story's synthesis is the realization that this distinction is false” (7). The power of the Superman mythology is the hope that it inspires the reader to strive for moral betterment—to be a hero in his or her own right.

We do not have the hope of flying or deflecting bullets, but we can accomplish tasks that are above our own nature. Maggin further states, “In the waning moments of the twentieth century, the superhero is Everyman” (5). Superman has competition in this new age of heroism—from the very readers who encounter the text.



Despite several fan's protests the collected *Kingdom Come* ends with a flourish of hope. Despite the troubles of the narrative, a third generation of superheroes is quickly approaching (210).

Red Son: Truth, Justice, and the Soviet Way?

DC Comics writer Mark Millar's *Superman: Red Son* (2003) recontextualizes the story of an American icon by placing his Kansas landing in the 1950s Soviet Union. Rather than standing for truth, justice and the American way, Comrade Superman stands for the ideals of the Socialist worker. Millar's goal is a forced reexamination of the roots of the Superman legend as well as the moral implications of the quest for creating a better world through the singular use of superpowers. In challenging the barrier between myth and reality, the audience is forced to question why we place heroes on pedestals, and in turn, whether there is a possibility of absolution from his otherness.

At this early stage in the narrative Superman is a newcomer in Stalin's inner circle. Having grown up in the Ukraine, he is kind-hearted and just but also dedicated to the cause of communism. The antagonist of the story is an all-too-familiar American Lex Luthor, a legitimate scientist at the employ of S.T.A.R. Labs and a super-genius very well aware of his intellect with little regard for lesser minds. Moreover, Luthor is married to the former Lois Lane. At the behest of C.I.A. Agent James (better known in traditional continuity as Jimmy) Olsen, Luthor joins a U.S. effort to rid the world of Superman. In order to collect genetic material for his first attempt, Luthor causes a Sputnik satellite to plummet towards Metropolis. As Luthor predicted, Superman arrives in time to divert its course. The satellite is retrieved by the United States government and Luthor uses the found traces to create a Bizarro clone of Superman, the first villain in what will come to be known as the rogues gallery.

After an assassination attempt by a member of Stalin's inner circle, the Soviet leader dies from cyanide poisoning. After Superman declines the leadership of the Party, despite

the palpable void left by Stalin's death. Superman realizes the people of Earth need a figure to inspire them. With both optimism and hubris, Superman believes he could be that person.

The second chapter, "Red Son Ascendent," begins in the 1970s, and the world is greatly different. Luthor has devised and executed several plans, none of which have eliminated Superman. Wonder Woman and Superman have now become a duo, using their superpowers to save as well as conduct their ambassadorial and governing duties. Luthor's second major attempt at destroying Superman fails as the sentient alien robot Brainiac shrinks Stalingrad instead of Moscow. Superman intervenes and retrieves both Brainiac's central unit and the tiny city, putting an end to the Brainiac-Luthor co-operation. He is unable to restore Stalingrad and its inhabitants to their proper sizes, which becomes his one failure and a source of great guilt.

In hopes of effecting a major political coup, Batman captures Wonder Woman to lure Superman to Lexcorp's red sun lamps that recreate the light of his homeworld's sun, sapping him of his powers. Superman is beaten and imprisoned, but Diana breaks the lasso used to imprison her and breaks Superman out, though the process seriously injures her. Batman commits suicide to avoid capture. As the chapter concludes, the third attempt begins when Luthor is given a mysterious green lantern found in an alien ship that crashed at Roswell. Batman becomes a martyr for his anti-Superman cause, Brainiac is reprogrammed into Superman's aide, and the construction of the Fortress of Solitude begins. Things are set for the finale.

The story concludes in "Red Son Setting," the final chapter of the narrative. In the year 2000, the Global Soviet Union remains the dominant political force on planet Earth;

however, Luthor obtains the U.S. Presidency and quickly returns the country to its prior glory. Luthor's attempt at forcing Superman's hand has finally worked. Superman takes on the East Coast, confronting and defeating the Green Lantern Marine Corps, the Amazon forces commanded by a highly disillusioned Wonder Woman, and a collection of "super-menaces" that Luthor put together over the years. Brainiac's ship cuts the U.S. Pacific fleet to pieces and the two meet at the White House, where Lois Luthor waits with the last weapon, a small note written by Lex that manages to break the Comrade of Steel's resolve by paralleling the plight of his citizens in the bottle city to his restrictions on the world.

Superman orders Brainiac to end the invasion and the robot reveals that he is not as reprogrammed as was previously thought. Eventually he is shut down by Luthor and destroyed by Superman, who carries the ship off into outer space, where the reader assumes the ship exploded, killing Superman in its wake.

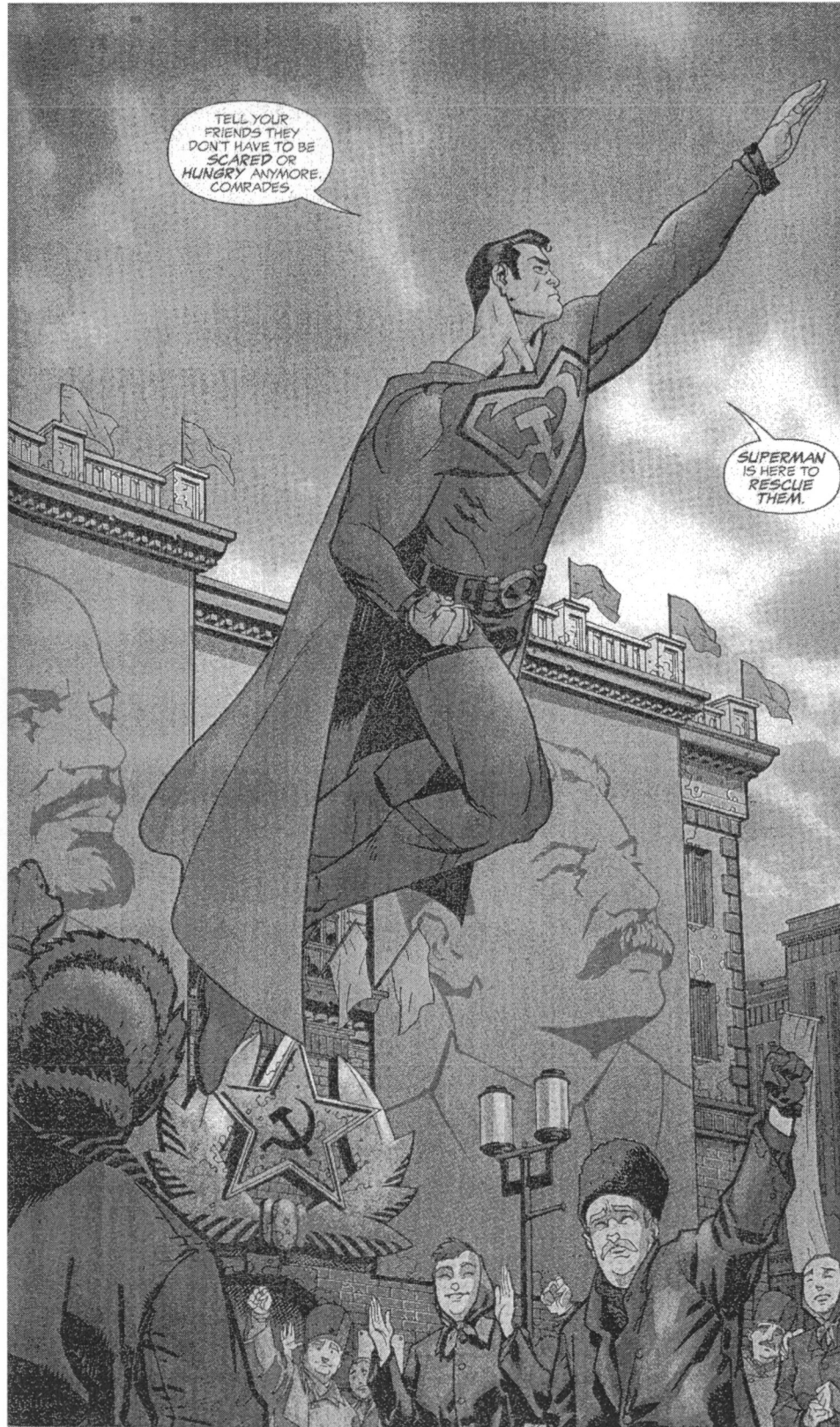
The epilogue follows with the Soviet Union's fall into chaos. Lex Luthor goes on to integrate many of Superman's ideas into the new philosophy of "Luthorism". This becomes the defining moment for mankind's future as it enters an unprecedented age of peace and stability. A benevolent world government is formed and kept that way. Lex Luthor lives for over a millennium, and at his funeral it is revealed that Superman survived and is apparently immortal. Now permanently retired from public view, he goes on to describe Luthor's descendants culminating in Jor-L, whose intellect exceeded that of even his beloved ancestor. It is revealed that Earth is being torn apart by tidal stresses from its sun (which is becoming a red giant). Jor-L and his wife send their infant son rocketing back into the past. The final panels of the comic book depict the landing of

Kal-L's timeship in a Ukrainian collective in 1938, where the narrative loop begins anew.

As I have noted throughout this study, the mythos of Superman provides ample ground for deconstruction. Max Schluz argues the recontextualization of these myths creates a folding of ideologies for the reader: “[these narrative’s] combination of reyearning the old myths and improvising them into postmodern continuations [. . .] manage the incorporation of old into new (or vice versa), of past storytelling with present [. . .]” (24). *Red Son*, along with other revisionist tales, adheres to the basic mythology established within the DC Universe, but break apart from the mainstream in order to create a new narrative world. Such a mirrored perspective is at the heart of what DC Comics refers to as its Elseworlds. The fictional-fictional universe in which *Red Son* takes place contains the same elements of the regular DC Universe, but is inherently different. As DC Comics summarizes,

In Elseworlds, heroes are taken from their usual settings and put into strange times and places—some that have existed and others that can’t, couldn’t or shouldn’t exist. The result is stories that make characters who are as familiar as yesterday seems as fresh as tomorrow. (4)

While originally utilized as a propaganda figure of the WWII era, Superman and other superheroes have been co-opted as part of a modern American mythos. It is in recontextualizing these heroes, that the audience is called to question its iconoclastic figures. The impact from this shift is especially influential because Millar selects *the* American superhero. As a character who has a uniquely American history and identity, Millar is able to keep the important broad strokes of the mythos in tact while simultaneously making countless shifts that change the face and meaning of the narrative. As such, the concept of history/time is directly linked to culture for Millar. As Superman becomes a Russian weapon, the equilibrium of the Cold War dramatically shifts in the



Not only does the classic color scheme of Superman's costume change but also the iconic "S." This shift of imagery is just as important to the deconstruction as the changes in plot (55).

direction of the Soviet Union. Just as I mentioned in regard to *Kingdom Come*, Superman is a figure who normally stands outside the petty political actions of humanity since politics generally operates in the moral “shades of gray” that are not conducive to the absolutism associated with superheroes. Both Waid and Millar are quick to assert that the political activism appears to come easy to Superman, but is ultimately a process that is riddled with the potential for failure.

Unlike most moves of retroactive continuity (or ret-cons), Millar places the beginning of the Superman story along the actual time-line of Superman's origin. This is confirmed by the time that Superman makes his first public appearance and is reiterated at the end of the novel when he arrives in the Ukraine in 1939—the same year Seigel and Shuster created the hero. Readers of Superman comics often comment that the Superman they are most familiar with is the character they first encountered—often as a child. Other variations of the character, in turn, appear to be inferior because they lack the familiarity of the earlier version.² With a story that is rooted in the past and moves swiftly to a dystopic future, Millar emphasizes the importance of the history of the character, but also the history of the “real world” that supports the character. Because the shift of time is so evident in the narrative, it is intriguing that Superman recounts his story from sometime in the very distant future--fifty generations after the fact, in a time when the yellow sun of Earth has become a red giant.

Another important shift deals with using Superman's own voice as the narrator of the tale. Millar asserts frequently that Superman is the Other of this text—the world's most

2 For more information on how a reader approaches the change in a superhero over time, one should read Dennis O'Neill's “The Crimson Viper Versus the Mechanical Morphing Meme” found in *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice and the Socratic Way* (2003).

powerful figure in terms of both might and politics. Superman tells his version of these events in hopes that it will provide some sort of justification for why the story unfolds as it does. In some respects, Millar acts as a Superman apologist. Comic book stories, as well as mythologies, are passed from generation to generation through the use of multiple narrators. As additional authors encounter the text, they add various nuances that were not in the original text. By allowing Superman to narrate the novel, rather than a third-person narrator, the reader is afforded what seems a more authentic text. There is an initial strength in this choice because: “Every age rewrites the events of its history in terms of what should have been, creating legends about itself that rationalize contemporary beliefs and excuse contemporary actions” (Coffin 526). While this rationalization is at the heart of the text, the first-person omniscient narration adds a sense of authenticity to a narrative that would not normally exist.

The scope of Superman's narration is not without some hubris, as he often seems overtly aware of his own aggrandizement both inside and outside of the text; in this realization, Superman is forced to encounter his altered past, present and future with a sense of humility that is atypical of mythological heroes. The narrator is a much more self-conscious figure, and his highly stylized presentation is meant to prepare the audience for a more elaborate and polished version of the story (Davis 220). After his first encounter with Lois Luthor, Superman would note: “Centuries later, after a thousand interpretations of this meeting, a famous poet would write an alternate history of the world where Lois Luthor and I became lovers. [. . .] Even now, I still don’t know what appeals to people about this notion” (Millar 23). In our narrative continuity, Lois Lane does fall in love and eventually marries Superman; however, Superman’s candor when

negotiating his own mythology allows both himself and his audience to encounter the power of mythos and how impactful even the slightest shift in the traditional narrative can be.

Jac Tharp contends this process of recontextualization is meant to reemphasize the idea that the narrative is only a myth after all: “The main theme is a treatment of a myth—perhaps the most important aspect of human culture, yet a record of a dream rather than reality” (54). While the recontextualized Superman stories of the Elseworlds continuity mirror the canonical continuity, the reader may conclude these worlds never existed in the past and still do not exist, despite the best intentions of both Millar and other authors. It is in this vacuum that the text is open for commentary. Because these myths are only defined by the “real world,” and not confined to its principles, such as the replacement of the “S” on the shield with a hammer and sickle, the authors are able to add to the narratives and offer further insight to the reader. The broad strokes of the narrative remain with distinct additions and omissions that are relevant to the author’s commentary on the mythos that, in turn, allow the reader a more critical frame for analysis and active participation in encountering the text.

While the shifting ground for the narratives establishes the greater context and literary playing field for Millar, what defines these reinterpreted versions of the characters are the various revisions that are added or omitted from the new narrative worlds. Millar's comic is full of “Easter eggs”—somewhat hidden information that is usually noticed only upon closer inspection—that are geared toward traditional fans of Superman. The title plays on both Superman's new Communist nature, and the red sun of his home planet, Krypton. Moreover, the duality of the superpowers of the protagonists in juxtaposition with the

political superpowers of the United States and Soviet Union only begin to scratch the surface of the text's commentary. Millar also includes alternate versions of such beloved characters as the previously mentioned Lois Lane, Jimmy Olsen, and Lana Lang. The Millar version of Superman is not a mere recapitulation that other comic writers have produced; he is a nuanced figure that retains the basic form but is holistically different. Zack Bowen argues this amendment is essential if the re-envisioned mythology is meant to impact the contemporary audience:

The traditional stories of mythology and folklore, with all their evolving human implications, demand that a modern rendering go beyond mere recapitulation or verbatim rendering of existing texts. Novelty, ingeniousness, innovation, and variation on the motifs are the substance of the storyteller's art, the treasure itself. (67-68)

The emotional awareness of Superman is truly what sets the character dynamically apart from his traditional interpretations. As previously noted, Superman is not only aware of his mythology, he is also terribly confined and hindered by it. The narratives seek to reinforce the idea that plot is not a matter of moving from "a" to "b" or good triumphing over evil; instead, the protagonist must not only accomplish the desired goal, he must also deal with the moral implications of previous feats and future endeavors.

Moreover, the addition and revision of secondary characters is often just as important in establishing the new narrative. *In Red Son*, new origins for Bizarro Superman and Batman put a significant twist on their characters, but the unexpected antagonist/antihero is Lex Luthor. While still Superman's archnemesis, Luthor is a brilliant scientist who does not seek to eliminate Superman for his own benefit, but to protect the interests of the United States and human beings in general. As in traditional Superman stories, the two are forever connected and diametrically opposed. Instead of Millar establishing a hard

and fast line of good and evil, both characters are forced to exist in shades of gray.

Superman questions, "What was the point of Lex Luthor? [. . .] Perhaps he existed to keep me in check or, as someone once hypothesized, perhaps it was the other way around. This is why he despised me so" (59). Ironically, Luthor notes in his study of Superman, "I honestly believe that Superman and I would have been the best of friends if he'd popped up in America" (24). Luthor holds to a policy of American isolation that eliminates any connection to Superman's Communist regime. Superman wants to spread Communism peaceably and not "on the bones of my opponents" (71). What neither character fails to fully encounter is that the narrative does not exist without their central conflict. Superman defines Lex Luthor to the same extent that Lex Luthor defines Superman. The traditional archetypes are shattered in favor of creating two characters who exist so much on the same mental and literary playing field that the reader cannot encounter one figure without simultaneously acknowledging the other. To simplify: a hero is not a hero without the villain; however, Millar does not make the reader's choice of assigning these roles an easy one.

The third tenant of this examination further demonstrates the division between the characters, who remain unaware of his existence in the narrative Elseworld, and the expectant audience. The Superman of Red Son believes that he is the only Superman who has ever existed and is a unique entity; however, the audience knows that self-concept is untrue. The narrator expresses the author's concern about the origin of the tale and its narration in the revised context. This revelation poses an even greater problem for both Millar as the question of character identity and choice come into play. Superman was born out of the need for an American hero in light of World War II. Jerry Seigel and

Joe Shuster, teenagers at the time, envisioned a hero who had the strength of Samson and the power of Achilles that stood for Truth and Justice. Because of the historical context, the addition of “and the American Way” was co-opted for use as well. What sets Superman apart from the other pulp heroes of the period was his sense of universality; he was a hero who encompassed the righteousness of the boys’ Hebrew heroes, the power of the classical gods and a desire to execute the ideals of United States in a period where it needed a figure who stood above the problems of mere mortals. Essentially, there could be no Moses of the twentieth century or Achilles of the industrial age—a new figure had to be born. How then does Millar allow Superman and the narrative to break away from these chains and assume narrative control? It is possible to assert that *Red Son* is a monologue the audience happens to look in on unnoticed. Superman experiences difficulty with the past, with the very stories defining him. The novel is then self-actualized mythological memories. As previously noted, the first-person narration is the key to reclaiming the power of the narrative. For mythologies that are an engrained part of our collective social conscious, it seems the only possible way of responding to the archetypes is to actually let the character speak on his behalf and “set the record straight.” This is a shared power, though, as the audience knows more about the mythology than even the characters do.

By forcing the narrator to respond to his own story, as well as question what lies ahead, Superman is better able to encounter the world and solidify his existence and accomplishments. When Superman is asked to assume the role of Soviet Premier, he meets with hesitation. Again, this moment of doubt stems from the assumption that Superman is the ultimate servant of the people. While Superman is a figure who is

greater than a regular person, current in-continuity writers have portrayed him as a limited figure. Though he is the preeminent hero, Superman is often overshadowed by the responsibilities placed on his shoulders. This problem of leadership has become an interesting point of contention within the DC Comics community as to the role of its greatest hero, who they believe should be a beacon of hope to not only the readers of the comic books, but to the very characters within the DC universe. When Superman questions, “My heart told me to lead them, but my head told me that this completely contradicted everything my parents had ever raised me to believe in. It’s strange how different things could have been [. . .]” (53), there is a longing for absolution and a distinct realization of immanent failure. The critical catalyst in reinterpreting our hero, then, is that these characters learn to live their lives by telling them to an audience, even if that audience is a single reader or person.

As with all three texts in this chapter, the greatest response on the part of writers and readers of a challenged mythology is the realization that a hero has the ability to fail in his undertakings. Literary heroes are not labeled as such solely because they possess nobility or character; those traits must manifest in actions and deeds that set the hero apart from his counterparts. Failure is essential in understanding the Superman of *Red Son*. As has been established, this is a far more pro-active Superman, yet the more he tries to positively influence the social and political spheres of the world, the more problems arise. At one point, he even begins to question if knowing he was around causes people to act more carelessly. Tom Desanto reminds readers in the forward to the collected graphic novel, “Even though the traditional ‘S’ on his chest has been replaced by the hammer and sickle, one thing is still the same—Superman believes he is doing the

right thing” (6). As the adage goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. At first, it seems that Superman has positively changed the world under a Communist influence. Again, seeing the big picture presents a major stumbling block for the hero. Superman misses the personal relationship that Wonder Woman can offer him. As an equal, she is the link between his humanity and his demigod abilities. By alienating her, Superman sets himself up as totally isolated from those whom he seeks to protect. Only at the end of the narrative, when the world exists without a Superman, does he conclude that humanity was able to better itself under its own power, not through him. Superman narrates, “For the first time in human history, the world had tasted death and so they gloried in their triumph [. . .] excited by Superman’s defeat[. . .]” (144).

The story there comes full circle. Superman was created as a beacon of hope to those around him. Lex Luthor concludes that Superman had some good ideas, but it is a fully-human Luthor and not the alien “Man of Tomorrow” who takes Earth to the pinnacle of achievement.

While Superman fails to accomplish his goals, the narrative ultimately folds in on itself when we return to the original hero’s perspective. The detoured response from the new to the traditional narrative form, however, is what reminds the reader why we value these myths so much in the first place. Though it seems Millar has turned the eternal hero into an antihero at best, Superman emerges from the narrative with the same sense of optimism in humanity that fuels his quest to help others in *Birthright* and all other continuity-based stories. This reemergence with the original myth leads the reader to some conclusions about the nature of our heroes.

The most valuable lesson from *Red Son* is the restoring of humanity to Superman—the



Despite Superman's best intentions and abilities, he fails at creating a Socialist utopia. Millar compares Superman's actions to the trapped citizens in the bottle city of Stalingrad (136).

same moral at the heart of *Birthright*. Reclaiming a human identity brings with it the offer of hope to Superman. Unlike the usual Superman, he is not forced to assume the secret identity of Clark Kent. Mark Millar takes this notion of humanity one step further. In the epilogue to the tale, centuries have passed and Superman returns to Earth as a mild-mannered person. Because the Earth's sun has turned red, he has begun to age and lose his powers; however, he still bears witness to the progress of humanity all the way to Lex Luthor's grandson to the fiftieth power—Jor-L. Readers familiar with the Superman mythos will note that Jor-L is the father of Superman, and the force that sends his son to Earth from a dying world. Millar rewrites the tale so that the baby Kal-L does not find another planet, but the very same planet he left in a different time. This action grants Superman the humanity that so many writers have sought to establish but cannot fully accomplish because of his powers. When Luthor refers to Superman as “the alien” he misses the truth that only the readers have—Superman is a part of Luthor's lineage. Thus, both have worked for the progress of humanity and both have done so because they are human.

Danny Fingeroth summarizes in *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society*, “A hero embodies what we believe is best in ourselves. A hero is a standard to aspire to as well as an individual to be admired” (14). Despite the otherness these heroes represent, there remains an innate connection between the figures who are so much greater than us and what we aspire to become. By reinvisioning Superman with the same flaws as normal people, Millar creates a story worthy of attention. While we can have heroics to aspire to, the true heroism is a part of being human—an attainable goal in a world of uncertainty.

Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow: Writing the Final Chapter

The problem with calling superheroes a true mythology is that there will never be a definitive canon of texts that is established as final and beyond dispute. As Richard Reynolds claims in *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*:

New canonical texts are being added every month. Any definitive metatextual resolution is therefore indefinitely postponed. That is to say, the DC or Marvel universe is not finally defined until some future date when superhero texts cease to be published. In the meantime, new texts must be made sense of within the continuity, or discarded as non-canonical. (43)

Reynolds is right. Because the nature of the Superman mythos is always in flux, it is impossible to offer a final critique on the character and his influence. Since he remains one of only three characters—along with Batman and Wonder Woman—to enjoy continuous publication since his inception in the 1930's, there is no reason to assume that an end is in sight for the Man of Steel. However, 1986 saw the elimination of the original Superman thanks, in part, to *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. In hopes of eliminating the confusion of years of continuity baggage, DC decided it would be best to combine the various narrative universes into a singular, cohesive unit.³ This reboot would provide a new springboard not only for readers but also for new creative teams to take a fresh approach to the characters. *Crisis* ended with the Superman of Earth-2 (the original Superman) entering a heaven-like state rather than being folded into the revised

3 For more information on the not-so-easily explained “DC Multiverse” visit the following website:
<<http://www.sequart.com/crisis.htm>>

continuity. The idea at DC was to punctuate the end of an era with a special “What if?” scenario. *Superman* editor at the time Julie Schwartz noted, “[. . .] it really was the last Superman story. It was not an imaginary story. You could utilize all the 'real' things that had preceded it.” Writing a story that fell outside of the traditional comic continuity, Moore was given a certain amount of freedom in approaching the character; however, he chose to remain true to the most basic elements of the mythos. As such, an “imaginary” story is simply a narrative that DC editors choose to not recognize as a part of the character's continuity. A “real” story adheres to all other canonical texts that have a set narrative history of Superman and will, in turn, be treated as canonical by future authors.

Crisis was not the end of Superman, it was just the beginning. The elimination of the “multiverse” in favor a singular universe was meant to give comics scribes a chance to start all DC characters' stories from scratch. The intent was to honor the continuity that had come before it, but, at the same time, allow authors the opportunity for fresh takes on the characters that had become burdened with this continuity. Though the original Superman was folded into a heaven-like world, a new Superman for a new generation of comics readers and writers was ready to take to the page in hopes of making Superman relevant for the eighties—not too unlike Mark Waid's work on *Birthright*.

Instead of a beginning, author Alan Moore treated these two final issues of the monthly Superman comics as though there was nothing more to tell. Schwartz's original intention was to have Jerry Siegel write the story, but due to schedule conflicts this was not a possibility. One can only imagine the symmetry that this would have afforded the narrative. The very author who created the figure fifty years prior having the final say on the character would make the perfect bookend. With so many authorial voices having

contributed to Superman over the years, the voice that would resonate at the mythos beginning and end would have been the singular style of Jerry Siegel. However, Moore had already distinguished himself as a *writer's* writer. His metafictional graphic novel *Watchmen* proved that he understood the nature of the superhero and was ready to critique the form and its most beloved hero.

The story begins with a junior reporter for the Daily Planet visiting Lois Elliot to write a retrospective on the ten-year anniversary of the death of Superman. As Lois Lane she found herself at the center of the drama that would unfold. In this revised history, 1987 had been a quite year for Superman; his major foes were either in jail, had been eliminated through their own devices or were laying low. It seemed as though there were no battles for Superman left to fight. This peace is shattered when Bizarro Superman—an imperfect clone of the Man of Steel—begins to go on a rampage. Normally a docile, bumbling figure, he begins to kill and destroy in order to do what is counter to Superman's nature. In a show of terrible logic, Bizarro kills himself.

It is shortly after this incident that the foolish characters Toyman and Prankster kill Clark Kent's childhood friend Pete Ross and expose his secret identity. The alien sentient robot Brainiac and Lex Luthor form a partnership to eliminate Superman once and for all. Now that his secret identity is public, Superman takes his closest friends to the Fortress of Solitude in order to protect them from harm. Superman is aware that a major battle is on the horizon. He is preparing for his last stand.

The Rogues Gallery of villains converge on the Antarctic Fortress of Solitude and lay siege to it. However, Superman is also visited by the Legion of Superheroes—a 30th century group of teenage superheroes—who wish to visit him before his final battle. The

implication that they know the end is coming troubles the usually unshakable hero. The power of the combined villains is too much. In an attempt to protect their friend, Lana Lang, Clark Kent's childhood friend and love interest, and Jimmy Olsen, the loveable but goofy kid photographer for the *Daily Planet*, try to fight but end up getting killed. Even Krypto the Superdog dies from poisoning from the Kryptonite Man. Superman reaches a breaking point and loses control. While this explosion of anger neutralizes the villains, he remarks to Lois Lane how odd it is that all his enemies would mobilize at once, and that one certain villain was missing: Mr. Mxyzptlk

Mxyzptlk, a clownish spirit of mischief, reveals himself to be the power behind these malevolent events. He controlled the villains to act even more sinisterly than usual. All these years, Mxyzptlk had been hiding his all-powerful nature out of sheer boredom. He proclaims that he is the eliminator of Superman—even the 30th century knows it. That reminds Superman of the statuette presented to him by the Legion. The figure is holding the Phantom Zone projector. The device transports criminals to a state of limbo where they are neutralized—not killed, but placed in a perpetual state of nothingness where they would be better off dead. When Mxyzptlk sees the device, he tries to transport back to the fifth dimension; however, the device splits him in half and the creature is no more. Realizing that he has caused the death of so many dear friends, Superman enters the gold Kryptonite storage chamber knowing what will happen next. Exposure to this variation of Kryptonite will eliminate Superman's own powers. Lois assumes that after losing his powers, the neutralized Superman died from exposure in the arctic.

Or so she says. After the *Daily Planet* reporter leaves, Lois Elliot's husband arrives home carrying their son Jonathan. The reader learns that the man was once Superman,

but no longer having powers, he is able to live a quiet domestic life with the woman that he loves. As the scene ends, the reader sees the baby playing with a lump of coal only to crush it into a diamond. The Superman legacy will remain intact.

Moore's greatest variance on the Superman mythology is that he has Superman act out of fear rather than heroism. By the 1980's the Golden Age Superman enjoyed near godlike powers—hence the never used gold Kryptonite was put in place. As Superman notes at Pete Ross' funeral, “All these years, my greatest nightmare has been that someone would strike at me through my friends. Now it's coming true. [. . .] If the nuisances from my past are coming back as killers . . . what happens when the killers come back?” (11). These “nuisances” are the typically pathetic, comedic villains such as Bizarro and Toyman that do not carry the same gravitas as a villain like Lex Luthor or Brainiac. The ever confident Man of Steel becomes riddled with self-doubt. Moore realizes that the most effective way to attack someone who is undefeatable is to harm those in his personal sphere. Central to adopting the secret identity of Clark Kent was to allow Superman to enjoy a life away from fighting crime while not placing Kent's friends in harm's way. When the Kent identity is eliminated, all that is left is Superman. One must wonder why the elimination of the secret identity would cause the facade of Superman to unravel, but as has been previously mentioned in the first chapter and present in both *Kingdom Come* and *Red Son*, we must place a privilege on Kent over Superman. It is the humanity of Kent that fuels Superman's never ending battle.

The reader is not used to seeing Superman as an emotional person. Feelings for Truth, Justice and the American Way are central to why and how he acts, but gritty human emotions such as fear and insecurity are often transcended thanks to his abilities. It makes

sense for Superman to feel love and anger, but not doubt. There is a certain point when Lois fears the end is near: when she sees the residue of emotion of Superman's face. She explains: "He never told me exactly what happened that night before the siege began, but as soon as I saw him the next morning, I knew something had upset him. He looked funny. He looked as if he'd been crying" (23-24). The accompanying full-page picture of Superman sitting with his face in his hands crying, is a tragic portrait of the hero. This is in direct contrast to the usual poses of Superman standing with arms akimbo in a classical pose. The next page shows the "future" human Superman. Here, Moore balances his commentary on a weak Superman versus an empowered regular Jordan Elliot. Once Superman loses his powers from exposure to gold kryptonite, the reader later discovers that Superman adopts a new secret identity of Jordan Elliot who marries Lois Lane and has a child. Moore has some fun with this name by drawing a parallel to Superman's Kryptonian father Jor-El. Even his new identity pays homage to his Kryptonian heritage while forsaking the last part of that identity.

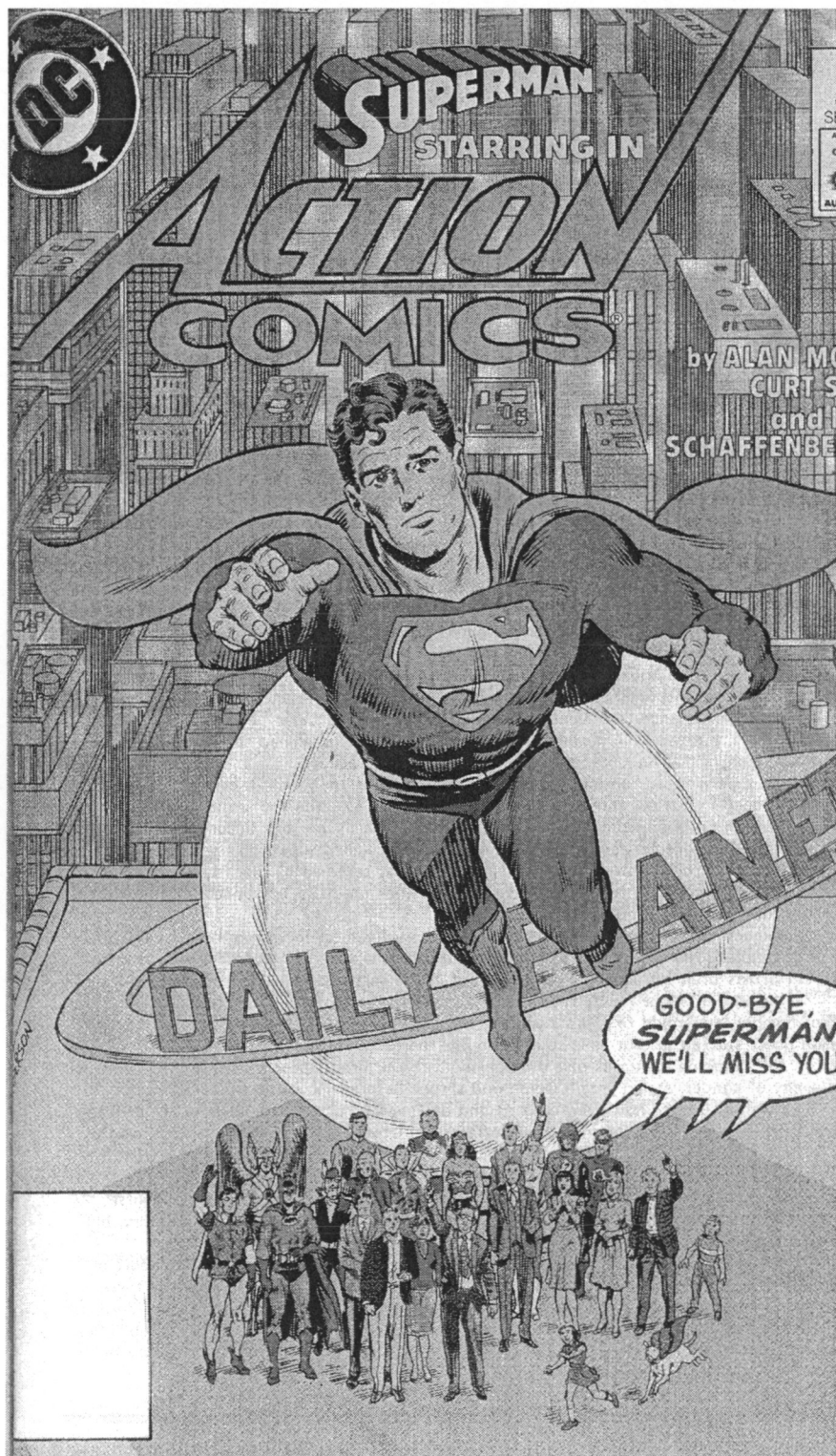
While Moore's portrait of Superman causes disjunction for the audience, his development of the thread of the narrative and the revised villains is also a shift. Comic book villains are generally a laughable lot—bumbling figures in ridiculous costumes who are quickly dispatched by the victorious hero. Moore's villains are murderers and act without reason or humanity. The fact that they are not controlled by a sense of restraint poses the greatest challenge for Superman. Their actions up the narrative ante as they both reduce Superman and force him to act counter to his established nature. Instead of the final showdown taking place in Metropolis, the scene of so many previous battles, Superman is forced to retreat to the Fortress of Solitude. By placing all of the villains in



Readers are not accustomed to seeing Superman show weakness—especially crying. Moore's vision of Superman is a hero who is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice (24).

Superman's Rogue's Gallery in one place, the reader feels the sense the finality at play. This battle is the one to end all battles and will be the definitive moment in Superman's life. This additional gravity to the narrative takes the reader beyond the issue-to-issue nature of the mythos. With finality on the horizon, everything is at stake for the characters involved. In turn, even the minor characters associated with Superman step up to the challenge. While Moore's narrative lacks the eschatology of *Kingdom Come*, the end is always the focus of the narrative.

Once more, the narrative ends with a sense of hope in the future. In this case, the hope is specifically that the Superman mythos has not been finalized and that more stories will some day take place. The retrospective story written by the young Daily Planet reporter is to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Superman's disappearance. Even a decade on, the citizens of Metropolis are fascinated by a character who has moved from the realm of the real to that of a legend—someone who is talked about as having once exists in some wonderful glory day, but is sadly no more. The relationship between the fictional universe and the “real world” of the reader begins to blend at this point. Moor surmises that our love of Superman stories will never wane—even after years of familiar plots, characters and scenarios. More importantly, the ending of one version of Superman is simply the beginning of another. Jordan and Lois Elliot will someday train a new Superman to follow in his father's footsteps. When that day comes, the citizens of Metropolis will be greeted with a familiar figure. The readers of Moore's tale, even in 1986, did not have to wait for their hero to return. The next month, *Man of Steel* #1 made its debut in comic shops around the world. While the authors, artists and subtle details may change, Superman will always be around.



In supposing Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? as the final chapter in the Superman mythos, Moore is able to bookend the history of the character in a way that no other Superman scribe is able.

THE NEVER-ENDING BATTLE CONTINUES

Even the world of comic books suffered the shattering blow of the events of September 11, 2001. Fans of the genre, who had read the weekly issues for years, were challenged to question the absurdity of super villains who destroyed city blocks with the most minimal of effort. Savvy Marvel Comics, ostensibly both out of respect for the victims' families as well as an altered New York cityscape, chose to pull a trailer for the upcoming Spider-Man movie that featured a gigantic web spun between the two towers of the World Trade Center. New York, as the American epicenter of comics artists and writers, changed with those events and provides the social panels this study draws upon. Whether one's understanding of New York is the real city where Spider-Man resides, the Gotham patrolled by Batman, or the stunning marvel of Metropolis protected by the Man of Steel, the thought that the literary landscape of heroes and villains could be forever changed in a matter of hours might seem like a nightmare for Jerry Siegel and Joel Shuster. The creators had seen Superman grow and evolve during World War II, the Nuclear Age and the Cold War and the collapse of communism. In the days after 9/11, fantasy worlds of disproportionate heroes seem rather silly. Those events verified the correctness of an earlier statement from Alan Moore: "I don't believe in heroes. A hero is somebody who has been set upon a pedestal above humanity" (qtd. in Wright 272). The heroes who answered the call were in fact the unsung masses of firefighters, police officers, medical professions and countless others who risked and, in some cases, lost their lives in hopes of saving others. Capes, cowls and tights meant nothing in comparison to the actual acts of heroism displayed in New York.

In response to the events of 9/11, DC Comics published a volume of stories titled

9/11: The World's Finest Comic Book Artists & Writers Tell Stories to Remember, which mostly featured semi-autobiographical sketches from various authors who were themselves trying to cope with the events through the cathartic comfort of their medium. Sentiments ranged from the stark anger of Frank Miller to reflections of inspiration for American's true heroes and the singular story in the collection to feature a superhero. Superman, trapped in the pages of a comic book, laments his inability to "break free from the fictional pages where I live and breath . . . become real during times of crisis and right the wrongs of an unjust world" (112). Left behind as a fireman rushes into the flames, he adds, "A world fortunately protected by heroes of its own." Superman, who has become a global icon of American strength and goodwill, helps to bridge the gap that exists between the often ideal world of comic and the all-too-real world outside of them. While the chapter does not feature crushing punches or city-wide battles, the story offers a relevant metatext as to the nature of Superman and an acknowledgment of his fiction. Granted, even the most expectant reader will eventually concede that superheroes do not don costumes to rid of the war of maniacal villains, prevent global disasters or save the day, but in times of need, real or fictitious, people look to the skies in hopes of finding Superman.

In reality, Superman and all heroes who have come and gone since his inception in the early twentieth century are part of the mythic fabric of American culture. The superhero is a manifestation of ultimate potential that is not wasted for personal gain or glory, but represents humble submission for the sake of those around him or herself. Richard Reynolds iterates this never ending battle and what is actually at state with each new monthly volume:

The key ideological myth of the superhero comic is that the normal and everyday enshrines positive values that must be defended through heroic action—and defended over and over again almost without respite against an endless battery of menaces determined to remake the world [. . .]. (77)

As the various authors of the Superman mythos have constantly built and reshaped its hero, one simple fact remains the same: Superman will always stand for Truth, Justice and the American Way. Sooner or later even the staunchest fan of comic books will tire of the rogues gallery of colorful villains who haplessly fight against Superman.

Conceivably, this eventual boredom is why writers have sought to reinvision Superman through such lenses as *Birthright*, *Kingdom Come*, *Red Son* and *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* Moreover, perhaps this is the reason that the readers who enjoy the new takes on the established motifs return to their comic book shop with a renewed appreciation and sense of adoration for a fictitious hero.

In reality, approaching the mythos of Superman in a new way or from a different angle is the goal of every writer and artist who finds themselves lucky enough to mark their particular influence on the character; however, these dramatic visitations of Superman's mythos stand out as singular examples of works that are true to mythos in every way, but push beyond the confines of continuity to forever change the way readers look at the character. These fresh takes afford both writers and their audience the chance to see a character with almost a century of history from the same fresh perspective of the first readers of *Action Comics* #1 in 1939.

Julian Darius laments in his essay "Superman 2002" the declining state of the mythos of the Man of Steel:

And so we look up, hoping to see [Superman] there in all his glory. There are glimpses, painted stories not meant to cohere with the canon, or of which the priests who guard the canon seem unconcerned. These days we seem

more inspired by newer capes, stranger gods who do not bear the weight of such a history, and who fly freer for it. And still we crave their progenitor, who changed so much and still might do so. (SequArt.com 22 July 2003)

Darius' remarks bears a striking similarity to ancient poetic elegies lamenting the loss of a great hero. While I share a respect for the mythos and where the character of Superman is headed in the new century, I am less inclined to share his sense of skepticism as to these revisionist tales. Editors, fans, and critics alike establish works such as *Kingdom Come*, *Red Son* and *Birthright* as more valued texts since the works have made the leap to the collected form of the graphic novel. The inherent strength of these works, unlike Darius assumes, is not that they fly free of continuity, but equally strive to pay homage to the countless works that have come before. Darius is correct that readers crave the Superman they are most familiar with—whichever incarnation of the Last Son of Krypton that may be, though if the reader looks hard enough and through the correct lens, they are most certain to find a Superman true to the mythos but fitted for the stories that have yet to be written.

While the name of Superman was originally meant to be purely hyperbolic, the previous decades have seen him face war, universal collapse, and even death itself only to emerge more powerful than before and more inscribed in the narrative fabric of the American culture. Without a doubt, future generations can expect familiarity with Superman's mythos be it in the pages of comic books, Saturday morning cartoons or blockbuster Hollywood films. As long as there are heroic ideals that are stressed in our culture, there will be authors who will seek to mimic these traits in fiction. The issues of

Superman that will appear ten, twenty or even a hundred years from now can be expected to be read differently from today's pages of *Action Comics*, *Adventures of Superman* and *Superman*; however, if the future writers approach this healthy mythology with the same reverence and optimism of today's scribes, one can be certain that the basic strokes will remain and the hero will shine through.

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